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LIVING WELL:
THE VALUE OF TEACHING PLACE

By
Catherine Mary Cave English

A DISSERTATION

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LIVING WELL: THE VALUE OF TEACHING PLACE

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University of Nebraska, 2011

Advisor: Robert Brooke

This dissertation is a teaching memoir that examines the implementation of a place conscious pedagogy as a means to teach sustainable living practices into a secondary English classroom in a rural Nebraska school. It is framed upon the premise of instilling five senses of place consciousness into students as defined by Haas and Nachtigal (1998) including living well in community or a sense of belonging; living well spiritually or a sense of connection; living well economically or a sense of worth; living well politically or a sense of civic involvement; and living well ecologically or a sense of place. I argue that the five senses of place conscious pedagogy parallel three key concepts of sustainability: economic, social and environmental well-being. I illustrate several teaching practices as a means to instill these senses and sustainable well-being into students' lives and consciousness, including oral history narratives in digital format, a deep mapping exercise, a writing marathon, work ethnographies, individualized local inquiries, and interdisciplinary local inquiries. I analyze and critique the value of connecting students within a writing classroom to other members of a community, which often involve intergenerational connections. I argue that these genuine inquiries and connections provide practice and mastery of basic writing and verbal communication skills and critical thinking skills.

I present the theoretical framework of place conscious education and sustainability in each chapter before presenting and critiquing student writing examples by exploring the kinds of rhetorical strategies students utilize within the framework of each writing practice. Each chapter concludes with a reflection on my practice in the language arts classroom. I also call for higher education to play a vital role in the paradigm shift needed to initiate sustainable education practices. Teacher preparation must play an integral part in developing place conscious, environment-based, or sustainability education. It is essential to implement effective teacher education in order for the public, i.e. school children, to become environmentally literate so they can comprehend the importance of living sustainable lives.

Dedication

Dedicated to the women in my life: my grandmothers, Anna Emilia Wetovick Boro, who first taught me to love a place in the strawberry patch; Mary Irene Schleich Cave, whose letters taught me to love writing; my mother, Elizabeth Amelia Boro Cave, who taught me perseverance and hope; and my daughter, Anna Rose English, who taught me that love is taller than God and more than infinity.

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Preface

“If you’re any good, you go somewhere else. You go where good people go. We raise our most capable rural children from the beginning to expect that as soon as possible they will leave and that if they are successful, they will never return.” –Paul Gruchow, Grass Roots: The Universe of Home.

Shifting Demographics in Rural Nebraska

I live and work in a community that many small town Nebraskans would consider a “pretty big town,” with a population of 4,479 according to the 2010 census, up six percent from 2000. Within the last decade many Aurora High School graduates have migrated to other areas of the country and many of them have moved to the metropolitan areas of Omaha or Lincoln. According to Dr. Randy Cantrell of the University of Nebraska Rural Initiative, there is a reason why they migrate to these two cities: “because Nebraska’s institutions of higher education are in the majority located in larger communities” (4). He notes that young people will continue to leave rural areas once they complete high school. Aurora is the county seat of Hamilton County and seventy-five miles west of Lincoln. The open country that buffers it from Lincoln is prime farm ground. On my commutes on Interstate 80 to the University of Nebraska as a graduate student for thirteen years, I have watched the seasons pass in the fields—planters in spring; combines in the fall.

Aurora’s “downtown” is built around a historic county courthouse completed in 1895, constructed of red brick with Colorado sandstone with a tall spire. A strobe light rests atop the spire in recognition of Harold “Doc” Edgerton, inventor of the strobe light,

one of Aurora's most famous native sons—and an MIT graduate. There are approximately 5-6 businesses on each side of the square. Some buildings are empty, some thrive. Within four or five blocks of Aurora's downtown, there are many majestic two-story houses that look like something out of the American South: palatial plantations surrounded by grand yards full of deciduous and evergreen trees. I drive M Street almost daily. It is the red brick street that runs from Highway 14, (16th Street) past the square all the way to 1st Street. Aurora High School is at M and 3rd Street. Each year, since we moved here in July 1992, I have taught approximately 100 students, give or take a few peaks in the population.

In 1998 our son, John, graduated from this high school, followed the demographic trajectory, and moved an hour further to the west and attended the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UN-K). After graduating from UN-K in December 2003, he left the state and taught middle school in South Carolina for four years, returning to live in the Omaha area where there are “good jobs” with higher incomes for him and his wife. Sandy Howland, a native Auroran who returned to teach elementary school and then retire here, is the Aurora Alumni Association's data keeper. She noted that of the 106 students who graduated in 1998, she could account for 102 in her data base and her records showed 21 students who still live in Aurora, 17 within the surrounding communities within fifty miles, 48 who live in the Lincoln or Omaha area or in another state, and 16 for whom she had no addresses. Of the data available, over fifty percent of the class of 1998 has out-migrated from its rural roots.

Our most gifted graduates continue to leave. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln's (UN-L) latest statistics note this continued out-migration:

Each year more people move out of Nebraska to live in another state, than move from another state to Nebraska. Thus, while the state receives many new international migrants, the net migration of domestic residents is negative. For example, from 1995 to 2000, approximately 3,000 more domestic residents moved out of Nebraska each year than moved in. Net migration also has created concerns about ‘brain drain’ because migration is most common among younger residents. Brain drain is partly an issue of out-migration alone: the notion that too many young people leave the state. (Carlson, et al, 1)

This brain drain affects communities in our entire state, that is, urban, suburban, and rural, but statistics show the growing trend that my son and daughter-in-law represent—the movement of young people from rural areas to urban areas:

The most recent release of population estimates from the Census Bureau indicates that 70 Nebraska counties lost population between 2000 and 2005. These counties included 52 of the 53 that recorded population losses between 1990 and 2000, joined by 18 counties that had grown through the 1990s...Of the 43 Nebraska counties containing no community of 2,500 or more residents, 42 are estimated to have declined in total population since the 2000 Census. These numbers clearly indicate a continuing concentration of Nebraskans in metropolitan centers and their suburbs. (Cantrell 1)

Peter Kilborn in *Next Stop, Reloville* notes that many of the people he designates as “Relos” come from the Midwest. He writes, “Many from the Heartland’s withering

farm and industrial towns joined a demographic effluvium known as ‘brain drain.’

Disproportionately large numbers began as top graduates of the public universities of the Great Plains and the Midwest” (217). He illustrates his point by highlighting the stories of three UN-L students, two from rural Nebraska and one student originally from Portland, Oregon. The stories of Kimberly Rylant and Jesse Whidden are classic examples of native Nebraskans and the brain drain. Rylant grew up in Stapleton, population 291. She was the valedictorian of her class of 20. She had a bachelor’s degree in biological systems engineering and a master’s degree in mechanical engineering. She said all of the companies she worked for as an intern told her she would have to become a Relo, moving every three years. Rylant began working for Stryker Endoscopy in June 2007 in San Jose, California, but after a year, she missed Nebraska—“‘I miss the wide open spaces, the slow pace, the people going out of their way to say hello’” (221). Jesse Whidden grew up in St. Edward, population 719 with a median income of \$33, 950 and 176 students in its entire K-12 system. As a senior in high school Whidden scored a perfect 36 on his ACT and achieved a 1590 out of a 1600 perfect score on his SAT. He turned down Harvard University after a visit to Cambridge. He received a bachelor’s degree in business administration and a master’s degree in finance from UN-L. He then worked for the UNL computer science department for a year before accepting a job in Kansas City for the Cerner Corporation.

Charlotte Hogg, assistant professor of English at Texas Christian University, grew up in Paxton, population 512, and completed her doctorate at UNL. She writes, “While I was growing up as a student and a ‘town kid’ in a rural western Nebraska school, no adults in the town (including and especially my family) ever mentioned the idea that I

would remain in my hometown after high school graduation. It was assumed that since I did not have a family farm to come back to...I would not return” (9). Hogg understands that “students living in rural areas of the Plains have been taught for decades that where they are from is unimportant and that the most advanced and intelligent students leave to achieve success by the dominant standards” (9). In *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Kathleen Norris bemoans this trend, too. “It is a *given* that isolated Plains communities cannot hold on to most of the best and brightest who grow up there. After college they move on to better job opportunities elsewhere” (50).

These Nebraska demographic statistics are mirrored across these United States as rural areas continue to decline and jobs are centered in urban areas. With urban areas as job centers, citizens settle in suburbs where there is a sense of safety against the urban issues of crime and violence. These suburban residents commute to work into the cities. Kilborn states that Relos are “a disproportionately influential strain of the vast middle class...[They are people with] a faith in open horizons and a willingness to risk losing ground to gain ground” (3-4). One of the most important aspects of their ‘settling in’, however, is assurance that their children receive the best education. Suburban dwellers, including this new Relo professional class, want their children to attend the best schools, where a healthy tax base builds new and improved schools with the latest in technology and where it seems the ‘sky is the limit’ in budget requests from the football team to the drama department, and where teacher salaries are consistently higher than salaries in impoverished rural areas.

I refer to these statistics and personal story to illustrate the point that over the years teaching in rural Nebraska, I have developed a fear that our rural communities may

not survive the current demographic shift. I am concerned about the sustainability of not just our economic well-being but the natural resources that bolster its economic survival. If we cannot live sustainable lives environmentally, we cannot live economically sustainable lives and our community or our social lives, including our physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural and spiritual well-being will dissolve. David Sobel, the project director of the Antioch New England Institute, began a place-based collaborative with several institutional partners in New Hampshire with the goal of school improvement and academic achievement but soon realized it wasn't just about the school. He conceptualized place conscious education as a three-legged stool: academic achievement, social capital, and environmental quality. He argues that these three elements form a dynamic tension—that none can stand alone:

Try to improve a school without actively engaging the community, and your efforts won't garner the budget support and human capital necessary for success. Emphasize community development without the involvement of the school and you won't have the youthful energy that makes projects work. Build thriving local economies with little concern for the environment and you'll find that businesses will have trouble attracting workers because people aren't willing to raise children amidst deteriorated air and water. (36)

Sobel's work has provided place conscious educators with a theoretical foundation that promotes a "vibrant and sustainable environment, economy, and society by encouraging informed civic engagement" (Antioch).

Sustaining a Future through Place Conscious Pedagogy

Like Sobel, I believe I can make a difference in sustaining our future as an educator and citizen through place conscious pedagogy. As the landscape of our rural community continues to change, place conscious education is the best possible means to face the changes we must accept and the challenges we must overcome as our demographics shift. This dissertation, a teaching memoir, conveys my personal process in searching, experimenting, writing and reflecting on key theories and practices in place-conscious education that leads to sustainable living. It depicts my progression but also critiques who I am as a place conscious educator. When I consider whether I have been successful teaching place-based curricula that emphasizes sustainable living, I focused on Robert Brooke's conceptualization that place conscious education "asks us to think of the intradependence of individual, classroom, community, region, history, ecology—of the rich way local place creates and necessitates the meaning of individual and civic life" (10). The intradependence of these six entities first requires awareness of each student and elicits several questions: Who is the individual in my classroom? How does that student impact his classroom? How does our collective classroom impact our community? Does our community impact our region? What is our history? How do our history and our 'present' impact our community ecologically?

Place conscious education is an approach to teaching that is emerging in several areas of the country, but it was first introduced in the early 1970s by Eliot Wigginton in Rabun Gap, Georgia with his *Foxfire* oral history and journalism projects. Other areas of the country where place conscious work has flourished are New England and the work of David Sobel, Clare Walker Leslie, John Tallmadge and Tom Wessels; the North Central states of Wisconsin and Minnesota with the work of the Aldo Leopold; the Pacific

Northwest and the work of David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith; and the Midwest and the work of Robert Brooke and Nebraska teachers highlighted in *Rural Voices: Place Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*.

Place conscious education is centered on community and bioregion, emphasizing student inquiry projects and interdisciplinary work and an audience outside of the school. Wigginton's students interviewed community members, transcribing and then publishing their stories. "Foxfire stresses the importance of capturing the wisdom of local people through interviews...and honors student intelligence and experience by involving them in the process of choosing some curricular content" (Knapp 20). Wigginton writes:

The end product should stand as an illustration of how the subject matter being covered in the class can be utilized, should involve the use of resources—human and physical—from the real world, and should be broad enough in scope to allow for...participation by all students, peer teaching and small group work, numerous approaches to the problem, questions for which [they] do not have the answers, class decision-making, and utilization of other academic disciplines. (406-407)

Smith, Sobel, and Gruenewald emphasize bioregion and community in their work. Smith, professor of education at Lewis and Clark College Graduate School of Education, Portland, Oregon, cites the work of the Environmental Middle School of Portland, Oregon where students visit "the Brookside wetlands and the Tideman-Johnson Park to conduct tests for water quality and to survey wildlife and plants; to Portland's wastewater treatment facility to learn how it purifies water for return to the Willamette River" ("Going Local" 30). Smith also writes about the Upward Bound program for high school

students that has students working in the Neawanna Estuary “tagging woody debris that makes good salmon habitat [and] mapping habitat for birds and other wildlife” (“Place-Based” 584). The student work was given to various groups in their locale as data to determine how to best use the land to support wildlife.

Sobel initiated the CO-SEED Project (Community-based School Environmental Education) in New Hampshire, a “regional place-based initiative [focused] on school reform, community development and environment resource protection” (43, 48). One of the CO-SEED projects was a historic walking tour guidebook created by fifth graders in Antrim, New Hampshire. Gruenewald, assistant professor of education at Washington State University-Pullman, advocates for a critical pedagogy of place that “aims to (a) identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation); and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)” (“The Best” 9). Gruenewald writes that developing a deep sense or consciousness of a place, especially an ecological understanding, cannot happen unless “place-based educators insist that teachers and children must regularly spend time out-of-doors building long-term relationships with familiar, everyday places” (8).

The mission of the Leopold Education Project based in St. Paul, Minnesota is creating an “ecologically literate citizenry so that each individual might develop a personal land ethic” (Leopold). The project organizers note that Aldo Leopold foresaw that people would lose the connection to the land as well as our realization that we are dependent upon our ecosystems, which Leopold named “landlessness.” The project strives to counteract this landlessness “through an interdisciplinary approach of reading

about Leopold's recorded discoveries and participating in meaningful 'hands on' activities, which provide students an opportunity to increase their appreciation for the land and to expand their ecological awareness" (Leopold).

All of these place conscious educators have impacted my theory and practice but none more than Toni Hass and Paul Nachtigal and their brief collection of essays in *Place Value: An Educator's Guide to Good Literature on Rural Lifeways, Environments, and Purposes of Education*. They argue "that quality of life depends on the connections that people have with one another and their surroundings, rather than on material wealth." They challenged me "to reexamine the purposes of education and to equip students with the tools they need to make conscious choices about living well in their own communities" (vi). Haas and Nachtigal believe "*living well* is most closely associated with the American rural way of life...[and] teachers can relate their work and lives to the places where they live and help students do the same" (vi). They believe educators need to instill five "senses" into students by the time they graduate:

1. *A sense of place, or living well ecologically.* Part of living well involves developing a sustainable relationship with the natural world in which one's community is located.
2. *A sense of civic involvement, or living well politically.* A second part of living well involves an understanding of government, broadly defined as the range of institutional ways communities make decisions that affect their members.
3. *A sense of worth, or living well economically.* The phrase 'making a living' captures this sense of living well.

4. *A sense of connection, or living well spiritually.* A fourth aspect of living well involves discerning connections to one's place on earth, that is, understanding and articulating the meaning of living one's life in a given place.
5. *A sense of belonging, or living well in community.* 'Community,' Haas and Nachtigal write, 'is how we together create a story about our place.'

If I can instill these five senses into my students I believe they can learn how to live sustainable lives, in particular, how to live well socially, economically, and environmentally. In fact, Haas and Nachtigal's five senses closely parallel these three key principles of sustainability. Their sense of place parallels environmental sustainability, their sense of worth parallels economic sustainability and their senses of civic involvement, belonging and connectivity parallel social sustainability. The word "sustainability" has been thrown around a lot in the last decade with varying degrees of interpretation. Within composition studies, this interpretation or the very definition of the word has become a difficulty. The most common definition came out of a 1987 report by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, i.e., sustainability defined as "meeting the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs...This is also referred to as 'intergenerational responsibility'" (Wheeler 50, et al). Derek Owens cites Ronald Engel in describing the word in this way:

'Sustainable,' by definition, means not only identifiably prolonged, but nourishing, as the Earth is nourishing to life, and as a healthy natural

environment is nourishing for the self-actualization of persons and communities... ‘sustainable development,’ in the broadest sense, may be defined as the kind of human activity that nourishes and perpetuates the historical fulfillment of the whole community of life on Earth. (26-27)

Owens declares that perhaps the best way to understand sustainability is “to adopt the six fundamental values embedded in the concept, as clarified by Stead and Stead: wholeness, posterity, smallness, community, quality and spiritual fulfillment” (27). The *Environmental Education Report* (2007) defines sustainability “as the interconnectedness of environmental, economic, and social systems. This is also referred to as ‘the triple bottom line of environmental health, economic prosperity, and social wellbeing’” (50). In “A Schooling for Sustainability Framework,” Michael K. Stone also writes,

Imagine sustainability as a far richer concept than simply meeting material needs, continuing to exist, or trying to keep a degraded planet from getting worse. A community worth sustaining would be alive—fresh, vital, evolving, diverse, dynamic. It would care about the quality as well as continuation of life. It would recognize the need for social, economic, and environmental justice; and for physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural and spiritual sustenance. (34)

Each chapter of this dissertation explores my application (or lack thereof) of Haas and Nachtigal’s five senses within my place-based classroom. Michael Stone acknowledge that “place-based education is an important part of ‘Smart by Nature’[sustainable] schooling” (38). In designing teaching projects for Haas and Nachtigal’s senses, I have considered how to teach sustainable living because it is “rooted

in a deep knowledge of place” (Stone 36). Each chapter is an argument for implementing place conscious curriculum within the classroom supported by the principles of sustainability. Chapter 1 focuses on a project “Elderly Voices—Living Links to the Past,” where my students met with nursing home residents, conducting interviews, creating their life narratives and then web pages about them. It demonstrates Haas and Nachtigal’s fifth sense, a sense of belonging or living well in community, an emotional or cultural sustenance. Chapter 2 focuses on the fourth sense, a sense of connection, or living well spiritually and how two writing assignments, one that involved a writing marathon to various places within the community and one that asked students to create “Deep Maps” as a visual depiction of their psychological and geographical place to help them conceptualize spiritual or intellectual sustenance through making connections about their identity, place and purpose. Chapter 3 demonstrates the third sense or a sense of worth or living well economically through work ethnographies which helped students conceptualize economic sustainability by exploring the changing demographics and economies in rural Nebraska. Chapter 4 explores the second sense, a sense of civic involvement, or living well politically, and how students must first learn about self government through a specific locale. It highlights my attempt to develop curriculum that offers students an opportunity to understand what it means to live publicly or to care about what goes on in their local community and school community. I share a local inquiry research project as an example of a deep democracy with open inquiry, communication and collaboration. Finally, chapter 5 critiques my lack of applying the very first sense, a sense of place, or living well ecologically, which is also where place conscious education began, in the ecological movement. This chapter reminds me how I

need to grow as a place conscious educator, because I haven't instilled a sense of developing a sustainable relationship with the natural world in my community. This chapter emphasizes how difficult it is to live well ecologically in an aggressive agricultural-based community where concerns over water usage are seen as necessary and a non-threat to our local watershed.

A Life-Changing Teacher "Moment"

What happened in my career that moved me to consider a place conscious pedagogy? In 1997 I was invited to participate in the Nebraska Writing Project's first Rural Institute in Henderson, Nebraska. The teaching demonstrations of that rural institute, with its emphasis on place, first piqued my interest in place consciousness. In a National Writing Project summer institute, teacher leaders are invited to participate in a course where each teacher brings from his or her classroom a best practice of writing which they demonstrate to their peers. Twenty-two teachers came from every part of our vast state, from the northeast, southwest, northwest and the central, spanning a range of 300 miles to become immersed into the locale of Henderson, population 986.

I know that we were all changed by that rural institute. I learned that the most successful practice in my classroom was building relationships with my students through a constant dialogue. I had to practice and model my own writing along with my students to affect any kind of change or growth in our lives or within our communities. I wanted a classroom community where students could write about what they cared deeply about and know that others cared just as much as they did. Sidney Dobrin, in "Writing Takes Place" states, "We write our places and in turn those places write us. That is, the relationship

between discourse and the construction of environment, nature, and place is a deeply enmeshed, coconstitutive relationship” (Weisser and Dobrin 18).

One of the epiphanies I experienced in the rural institute was that “local knowledge both centers, and spirals out into, more general knowledge, whether in history, science, business, or literature. If we understand our local place well enough to grasp how it came to be this way, the forces that shape it, and how it compares to other places, we will have developed a robust and extensive knowledge base” (Brooke 63). In this summer institute three teachers from the Henderson community and school studied places nearby the community: Suzanne Ratzlaff and the history of Farmer’s Valley cemetery, Ron Pauls and the Big Blue River biome, and Sharon Bishop and the Marie Ratzlaff Memorial Prairie. These teachers focused on environmental learning where place-conscious education has its roots. In *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities*, David Sobel writes, “Environmental education grew out of the Nature Studies movement of the early twentieth century and traditionally focused on learning about the natural sciences...Place-based education takes us back to basics, but in a broader and more inclusive fashion” (8-9).

These three demonstrations “addressed an underdeveloped aspect of critical pedagogy through intentional experiences, or learning opportunities that are intentionally or deliberately structured while remaining exploratory and inquiry-based in nature, focused on local place” (Ball 204). These demonstrations made me contemplate what I could do within my school and community to engage my own students concerning the history, culture, science, business, or literature of our place. I marveled at the thought of students going outside the classroom to explore the community around them, and not just

a community of people, but the land, the flora and fauna. These teachers understood what Wendell Berry meant when he wrote: “so all who are living here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another,...therefore, our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, and so neither can be better than the other” (*Unsettling*, 22). Berry also notes that “a healthy culture is a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the human limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other” (43).

Ratzlaff’s demonstration focused on a sense of connection, or living well spiritually, a cultural and spiritual sustenance, discerning connections to one’s place on earth and understanding and articulating the meaning of living one’s life in a given place. Ratzlaff, an elementary teacher, engaged us with stories of people buried in Farmer’s Valley Cemetery. She had taken her students to the Plainsman Museum in Aurora to investigate the lives of some the people buried in the cemetery. Ratzlaff gave us a printed record of each person buried in the cemetery, but the stories she told made these people come to life. Her demonstration helped me to personally contemplate the importance of action—I had to act in order to preserve history within my community. She had devoted a great deal of time and effort to learn more about Farmer’s Valley Cemetery on behalf of her students, and I would soon find out that it takes a lot of time to glean the stories from local residents and then write about them.

Ron Pauls was the elementary principal/guidance counselor at Heartland Community Schools, but he was also a former science teacher. Pauls’ demonstration focused on the biome of the West Fork of the Big Blue River. His teaching demonstration

centered on a sense of place, or living well ecologically, developing a sustainable relationship with the natural world in his community or as Owens notes “a healthy natural environment is nourishing for the self-actualization of persons and communities.” In his demonstration, he noted this about the Big Blue River: “[It] is part of our surroundings. Our life here will be made richer and our chances of survival will be enhanced if we can come to some understanding of this phenomenon of nature, why it is the way it is, its impact on us, our impact on it, and what our understanding will mean for both our futures” (English, Writing Portfolio). Pauls asked us to observe this biome on our ‘field trip’ to the West Fork, which at that time of year was barely a trickle, but definitely a river bed. The photographs I took that day contain native flowers and grasses and a nest. I became enthralled with knowing the names of things while we were scanning the area surrounding the river. Pauls’ expert instruction on the elements of biome and the river ecosystem elicited many memories for me from my own childhood associated with another river, the Platte.

Ron Pauls’ intentional instruction had asked us write “about a past or present experience with a stream. It could be memories of living near a stream and how you went wading and catching tadpoles, or fishing, or bridges along the stream, floods in the stream and your feelings at the time, sights and smells along a stream then and here today” (English, Writing Portfolio). Pauls also made me think again. He made me think more critically about the ecosystem of not only the Big Blue River, but the Platte River and all of the characteristics of plants and animals living alongside me. He had asked us all to zoom in to the life around us and consider the effect of human behavior upon the

ecosystems right here in our back yard. I became acutely aware of my own use of water and began to question the extensive use of water in the Platte River Basin.

One of the concepts that Ron Pauls deeply understood is that it is vital for students to know about their environment in these present times because knowledge of their place will affect the decisions they make as future citizens. He notes,

‘These people are residents of the prairie. It’s a place where they were born. They live here now. I think it’s good to have some understanding of the big picture, of the ecosystem where you live...I really believe that we’re on a crash course with the future because what we’re doing now in agriculture, I don’t think, is sustainable. I just don’t think that very many people can continue to make a living from agriculture on the farm the way we’re doing it now. I think it’s going to have to change. We’re going to have to change policy, and we’re going to have to change the way we do things to better fit the environment.’ (qtd. in Ball 214)

While Pauls asked us to consider the present ecosystem of the Big Blue River and the sustainability of this ecosystem, his colleague, Sharon Bishop, asked us to observe the Marie Ratzlaff Memorial Prairie. Like Pauls, Bishop’s teaching demonstration zeroed in on Haas and Nachhtigal’s first of the five senses, or living well ecologically. The preserve contained elements of flora and fauna from Nebraska’s original prairie grasses, much of which has since been plowed under to cultivate corn. As Bishop stated in her demonstration, “This ecosystem is a kind of museum because it gives us a small picture of what Nebraska looked like before settlement. It is also kind of a laboratory, able to be studied from many scientific perspectives: webs and food chains, root systems, plant

communities, etc.” Bishop asked us to use our “senses and record [our] observations, feelings, responses to this land. Imagine what Nebraska looked like before settlement.”

Sharon Bishop also shared with us the integrated curriculum unit she created with biology teacher, Mark Regier. She writes, “This curriculum integrated science and language arts to present opportunities for sophomores to learn about a native prairie, a wetland, the Sandhill cranes, and some aspects of their rural culture from scientific and literacy perspectives” (English, Writing Portfolio). The objective for their students was to “know the interdependence of all systems of the prairie and the influence of man on the prairie and the influences of the prairie on man.” It greatly intrigued me that Bishop and her colleague were able to integrate language arts and biology, using lab procedures, poetry, essays, photographs and small group work so students could learn about the ecosystem of their surrounding area. Bishop’s insight and commitment to place-conscious education was extraordinary. She portrayed deep convictions concerning how “projects that connect young people productively with other youth and adults are now seen to be the foundations upon which healthy communities can be built... The success of any community-based approach to learning rests on whether a new and empowering partnership between the community and school has been developed” (Miller 163, 167).

Although I have understood the concept of sustainable living most of my life, the urgency to teach sustainable living through the practice of place conscious pedagogy began to emerge and take shape because of the place-conscious teaching demonstrations of Ratzlaff, Pauls, and Bishop. Because their school was small and they were concerned about its survival their demonstrations exemplified the personal investment of their time, love and devotion because they wanted their school to continue well into the future.

Stone notes, “Well-known, well-loved places have the best chance to be protected and preserved so that they may be cherished and cared for by future generations of students” (38). It’s not hard for me to imagine a future for the community of Henderson, Nebraska. Since that summer institute, I have read many authors who extensively discuss this issue, but I was first influenced by two writers, Kathleen Norris and Paul Gruchow. Norris’s book, *Dakota*, exposed the life of a small Midwestern town in such a candid way, that it was actually very difficult for me to read, but I knew what she was talking about. Her chapter, “Gatsby on the Plains,” struck a chord with me.

It is a given that isolated Plains communities cannot hold onto most of the best and brightest who grow up there. After college they move on to better job opportunities elsewhere. Of course, many who come back to run a family business or ranch are as bright and enterprising as those who opt to leave, but even these people have a difficult time maintaining a normal sense of the world ‘outside’. (50)

Paul Gruchow echoes Norris in his book, *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home*. Gruchow also bemoans the loss of the brightest and the best in his chapter, “What We Teach Rural Children”:

These are the lessons we teach our rural children today: that their parents are expendable and that their duty is to abandon their dreams and to become cogs in the industrial machine.

Here is another message we give them, in ways both subtle and direct: if they expect to amount to anything, they had better leave home. The truth is, the future we are preparing for ourselves in rural America does not

include a place for ambitious young men and women. A friend of mine who teaches at a rural university says the institution ought frankly to offer a class called ‘How to Migrate.’ (98)

The change in my “teacher thinking” toward a place conscious model that advocates for sustainable living began surrounded by a group of devoted teachers in a school building in a small community about two miles south of Interstate 80, a fifteen minute drive from my home. That same summer, our city administrator, Mike Bair, asked me if there was any way that my students could interview some of the nursing home residents in our community. “The impetus: his wife, my teaching colleague, Alice Bair, had regrets about not recording some of the family history before her 100 year old grandmother died. As Bair lamented, ‘Now all that personal history is lost’” (English, “Do You” 1). All of those residents of the nursing home are now deceased, but their stories have been preserved. If necessity is the mother of invention, then Bair’s need created for me a means to apply what I had learned that summer into my classroom the following semester.

Initially, I had a very vague understanding of what it meant to turn place conscious theory into practice in my classroom. After the rural institute in Henderson I just knew those teachers “were onto something.” I thought their activities were engaging and I desperately wanted my students to feel engaged in their learning. I wanted them to care about learning as much as I did. I also wanted them to care deeply about writing. Without fully knowing just how much work it would be, I simply dove into a very large place-based project I titled “Elderly Voices—Living Links to the Past,” creating stories

together with local nursing home residents, which received funding through the Peter Kiewit Foundation based in Omaha.

Since that time, through multiple experiences and “experiments” in the classroom, I’ve come to understand more clearly what Haas and Nachtigal conceive as community: “Community is how we collectively create a story about our place. It is the narrative of who we are, how we get along together, how we make a living, and how we are connected to it...Community is how we live well together” (21). I’m convinced teaching a place-conscious curriculum centered around Haas and Nachtigal’s five senses and grounded in the principles of sustainability, helps young people understand the value of each citizen in a community, whether they are 95 years old or 5 years old. It helps them understand their own value in a community. Robert Brooke writes, “By centering education in local civic issues, history, biology, economics, literature, and so forth, learners will be guided to imagine a world as intradependent, filled with a variety of locally intradependent places, and to develop a richer sense of citizenship and civic action” (6). Through teaching a place-conscious curriculum I have learned about the heart and soul of this community, and am surrounded by residents whom I respect and consider friends because they were willing to share their stories and histories with my students. We have expressed our experiences with community members through various compositions, and we have learned, together, about the history, culture, economy, and the land. And we have learned about why it’s so important to care about sustaining this community well into the future. I know I serve my community in the best way I know how: preparing its future citizens for the task of citizenship. Like Marian Matthews says in the afterword of *Rural Voices: Place Conscious Education and the Teaching of*

Writing, “I want to learn something about myself, my capabilities, and what I can contribute as a citizen to the place where I now live. I think this is what we all want and what we want for our students” (187).

Chapter 1

Living Well in Community: A Sense of Belonging

Valuing place, connecting schools to communities in reciprocal relationships, and emphasizing the importance of learning to live well in community requires rare courage and self-confidence.—

Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal, *Place Value*.

The Importance of Inhabiting a Place

I care about teaching and writing. I care even more about my family. As a teacher I have to find the best possible way to synthesize those concerns into living well for the rest of my life—in a community. I also have a fear: we are losing our way as citizens in a democracy because we no longer fully comprehend what community means or what is required of us as citizens. Paul Theobald reminds me that “care and concern for the well-being of a place, particularly a shared place...is conspicuously absent in our mobile society” (47). Because our employment isn’t necessarily tied to a place as it once was, we are less invested in developing the kind of structures where everyone can live well in a particular locale. To sustain a strong democracy well into the future, we must restore the health of our communities (2). Theobald expressed his concerns in 1997, long before many of the technological toys came along that now distract our citizenry even more than our constant mobility. Some might argue that cell phones and social networking websites help maintain a sense of community or connectivity, but these tools are not focused on maintaining a geographical place where people gather face to face to govern, educate, recreate, worship, and prosper.

To begin this restoration process we must better understand the concept of “inhabiting a place” in “a practiced way, in a way which relies upon certain, regular, trusted habits of behavior” (Kemmis 79). Inhabiting a place means relating to our neighbors because we work, play, celebrate and grieve together. Daniel Kemmis, former mayor of Missoula, Montana and a state legislator, explains that habitation “implies right and wrong ways of doing things [and] ‘doing things right means living as though your grandchildren would also be alive, in this land, carrying on the work we’re doing right now, with deepening delight’” (80). My challenge as an educator in this community, Aurora, Nebraska, is to insure that students develop deepening delight in awareness of their place because that awareness affects the practices they develop and the culture they create. Kemmis cites Robert Bellah, who describes this as “practices of commitment”:

People growing up in communities of memory not only hear the stories that tell how the community came to be, what its hopes and fears are, and how its ideals are exemplified in outstanding men and women; they also participate in practices—ritual, aesthetic, ethical—that define the community as a way of life. We call these ‘practices of commitment’ for they define the patterns of loyalty and obligation that keep the community alive. (81)

For more than a decade my vocation has been to help students define these patterns of loyalty and obligation through implementing place conscious practices into my classroom. Place conscious curricula “teaches about both the natural and built environments. The history, folk culture, social problems, economics, and aesthetics of the community and its environment are all on the agenda. In fact, one of the core objectives

is to look at how landscape, community infrastructure, watersheds, and cultural traditions all interact and shape each other” (Sobel 9). Place conscious education acknowledges that “our minds are shaped by landscape as they are by our genes, and that stories are the threads that connect our intellect and spirit to [our] outward existence” (Blew 39).

Kemmis believes Americans have forgotten what it means to be citizens of a republic. He notes that the Latin phrase was “*res publica*—the ‘public thing,’” or what it means to come together as citizens for the good of our community. He asserts that “strengthening of political culture, the reclaiming of a vital and effective sense of what it is to be public, must take place and must be studied in the context of very specific places and the people who struggle to live well in those places” (7). Kemmis argues that we have become placeless in our politics because the modern political climate keeps citizens apart (18) when, in fact, we need to be reintroduced to the concept of intradependence which “means to exist by virtue of necessary relations *within a place*” (Theobald 7).

Because modern politics “keeps citizens apart” we do not draw together for the common good. Theobald asks us to recall the ancient Greeks as role models for the present:

For the Greeks, freedom was the outgrowth of human dignity, something to be achieved through the exercise of rational power directed toward the betterment of the ‘polis.’ ...Individuals were first and foremost members of a community. A person’s livelihood was assessed by considering the productive contribution it made to the life of the community. (8-9)

Hass and Nachtigal’s fifth sense to instill into students is a sense of belonging, or living well in community, or how we together create a story about our place (21). They

argue that a “community’s collective memory is the key to survival” and cite Elliot Wigginton’s *Sometimes a Shining Moment*, ““Students...must have an understanding of themselves as members of a society with a history and a future...we and our students must understand how the world works [and] skillful teachers find ways to give children reasons to communicate to real audiences”” (23). Brooke expands upon this sense of belonging:

It is understanding and internalizing the heritage, values, and history of a community, but it is equally developing vision and efficacy. Students need to understand who their community is and why it is that way—they need a healthy, historical, and contemporary sense of celebration and critique of local culture...they also need to act effectively in and with the community—identifying current strengths and problems, negotiating satisfactorily with community members who hold different opinions, challenging local and external definitions of community that would restrict and stagnant. (11)

In “A Schooling for Sustainability Framework,” Stone writes that as educators teaching sustainability, we must teach students that they are a part of the natural world and “emphasize self-understanding and personal mastery; recognize the responsibility to use knowledge well in the world; understand the effects on people and communities of the application of knowledge and provide role models of integrity, care and thoughtfulness” (Orr qtd. in Stone 33). A community worth sustaining emphasizes emotional and cultural sustenance and a deep sense of belonging. Educators play a vital role in creating “a fresh, vital and

dynamic” community by nurturing students who “feel concern, empathy, and respect for other...living things, work with and value others and commit to equity, justice, inclusivity, and respect for all people” (44).

Aurora has always had a strong foundation of exemplary citizens committed to excellence who work tirelessly to improve the community. Our school has been the number one priority. There aren’t many other communities in Nebraska where students and educators receive the kind of community support we do. But I have also noted how our school district has a mission statement about preparing learners for a global society, contemplating a future anywhere, and conveying open-mindedness about the rest of the world. Most school districts in the country have adopted a similar mission statement, because “education is explicitly linked in policy and practice to the narrative of economic globalization” (Gruenewald and Smith xiv). Recently, a new movement called “‘the new localism’ has emerged...that recognizes that economic globalization under corporate capitalism is, potentially, economically devastating, culturally homogenizing, and ecologically destructive to local communities” (xiv). This new localism doesn’t reject capitalism or a market economy but “embraces a kind of place-conscious economic development that will benefit the inhabitants of local communities today and for the long term” (xiv).

In reality, many students don’t know their own backyards. They don’t know the community’s history, its economic foundation, or much of its culture. It is vital for our students to know these aspects of our community so they can name what is important to them, develop a critical eye about their surroundings, gain a sense of ownership and responsibility for their community, and build problem-solving skills that can address our

civic concerns. Gruenewald believes that to live well in a place we must reinhabit or “dwell” in a place which is “‘an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with a place’ compared to residency, which is ‘a temporary occupant, putting down few roots’” (“The Best” 9). Gruenewald cites Orr who writes, “‘The study of place...has a significance in reeducating people in the art of living well where they are’” (9).

Gruenewald continues, “Of course, the meaning of ‘living well’ differs geographically and culturally. A politicized, multicultural, critical place-based education would explore how humanity’s diverse cultures attempt to live well in the age of globalization” (9).

My exposure to place conscious theory forced me to ask some very difficult questions. How do I elicit an understanding of who our community is and why it is the way it is? How do I inspire students to believe it’s important to look at our strengths and our problems? Why should they want to learn how to communicate and negotiate in a civil manner? How do you offer students in a small town an opportunity to critique their place without turning it into some reality T.V. show rant? Adolescents are the master of critique, which is a good thing—they are young and passionate and will give everything they’ve got if they are on fire about something. They won’t become better citizens without action, so for me, the challenge is to offer students an opportunity to act within their communities. Theobald states, “Community residents must be reminded again and again that it is *pedagogically wise* for students to be out in the community during school hours. This is why it is impossible to overstress the need to communicate as widely as possible” (77). Sobel also cites the Rural Challenge Research and Evaluation Program of 1999 concerning the importance of the student grounded and rooted in place:

A grounded, rooted learner understands that his/her activities matter, that they affect the community beyond the school. It is out of this particular formulation that the ‘*student as resource to the community*’ takes shape—that understanding that students need to be thought of as productive assets to the health of the community. (12) [Emphasis Sobel]

If I give my students an opportunity to become rooted in their place and encourage them to see themselves as contributors to their local communities, then I have faith that they will carry on their action as vital citizens into the communities they will eventually live out their lives. Wes Jackson calls this sense of rootedness, nativeness, and he believes that consumerism, envy and greed are the enemies of this sense of nativeness. He believes that we, at the university level, must be the leaders in helping our students become grounded in place. We must “assume the awesome responsibility for both validating and educating those who want to be homecomers—not that they necessarily want to go home, but rather to go someplace and dig in and begin the long search and experiment to become native” (Vitek and Jackson 101). If I can help my students understand the importance of nativeness, I have faith that they will understand their own value as resources as citizens of Aurora, Nebraska or any other community they may ‘dig in’ to in the future.

Collecting and Preserving Stories

Like many first-time place conscious teachers, I began with a project that focused on celebration of place rather than critique, preserving personal stories with a nostalgic tone. The project, “Elderly Voices—Living Links to the Past,” a collection of oral histories from local nursing home residents was funded by the Peter Kiewit Foundation,

located in Omaha, Nebraska, a private independent foundation to support charitable and public-purpose projects in a limited geographic area. In 2010, the foundation contributed over 9 million dollars to projects throughout Nebraska. I received the funding because I wrote a grant application at the prodding of a colleague of mine, Angie Mournal, our American history teacher. She observed how much I loved writing and technology, and she recognized that the awards were given for innovative practices in the classroom, and my proposal included creating web pages, something quite new at the time. In 1997, the \$7,000 award funded two guest speakers, one a storyteller and one a historian, a new computer with Windows, tape recorders, tapes, and 3.5 inch floppy disks.

Looking back, I am proud of the work my students accomplished in this preservation act for our community. Over the years, students have preserved many stories of our community members. They achieved what Hass and Nachtigal meant by living well in community through creating stories together that allowed them to acquire fundamentals and skills and put those skills to work in real ways (23). We prepared ourselves to actively engage in learning about our community's heritage by interviewing local nursing home residents with some specific training in working with the elderly from our visiting scholars, Nancy Duncan and Barbara Sommers.

Mrs. Duncan helped us understand the importance of ownership of the story, and that preserving the 'voice' of the interviewee was tantamount. This explanation of voice was an important concept for my students because as I taught 'voice' in composition classes, students didn't always recognize what it meant. Working with others, trying to tell his or her story, gave students a very real sense of the person's identity and how every voice is important. Caroline Heller in *Until We are Strong Together* writes, "a true

democracy is contingent upon all citizens developing clear, precise and powerful voices” (8).

Mrs. Sommers, on the other hand, helped us to recognize exactness. She helped students formulate pointed questions and how to ask follow up questions when residents said something they found intriguing. She helped them to think about narrative threads. She also explained the legal ramifications of publishing someone else’s story. Both Sommers and Duncan emphasized the great responsibility my students and I took on in staying true to and honoring each person’s story. In retrospect I more fully comprehend this burden to ‘get it right.’ We explored the heritage of some of the oldest residents of our community and learned what was important to them over the years. This is a phenomenal act, really, because so often, the elderly are marginalized in our society. It helped us to see how their loyalty and obligation to a place shaped our community.

The gathering of these stories was public. Our stories didn’t stay in the classroom. They were presented for the entire world to see on the Internet when it was still in its infancy. Public for us meant worldwide publication of stories meant to depict how two very unlikely demographic groups (the adolescent and the aged) came together for the good of the community. This publication provided a chance for all of our voices to be heard. As Heller noted, it provided citizens an opportunity to develop “clear, precise and powerful voices” (8). The stories conveyed how each elderly resident had contributed to the common good through his or her lifetime but also showed my students’ contribution to our community by completing the stories in a thoughtful manner. This is, I believe, what Sobel meant by a grounded, rooted learner understanding that his/her activities matter because the work they did affected the community beyond the school.

It was also public in several other less prominent ways. Before the stories were ever told, I had to make arrangements for our visiting scholars, contact the directors of the local nursing homes to ask for their advice about which residents would be most willing to share their stories, get permission from our administration to leave the building, schedule busses to transport students to said nursing homes, schedule several class times at the nursing home and then of course, help students with the transcription process, and then schedule computer lab time so students could create a web page that contained the nursing home residents' stories. As with any grant funding program, at the end of the year, I submitted a final report to the Kiewit foundation. At first glance, this may seem like a "To Do" list for me as instructor, but looking more closely, you can see that all of the other people involved were part of this 'public' I speak of: storyteller, historian, nursing home directors, nursing home residents, principal, transportation director, technology director, students, and foundation personnel. These citizens all contributed to the success of this place conscious project. Without the people who were willing to work with me and my students, there wouldn't have been any stories to share. For me, personally, it was an opportunity to build new relationships outside of my school domain, working alongside community members and appreciating the work they do. If a person's livelihood is assessed by the productive contribution he or she made to the life of the community, then everyone involved in this project has lived well in this place.

The stories collected and published by my students depict how several dozen citizens in Hamilton County, Nebraska lived well for a lifetime in one locale. Many of them never ventured very far from this immediate location. One who did travel beyond this county was Virginia Speich. Miss Speich's story describes the way of life of a

woman dedicated to teaching in rural Nebraska. Speich was what I like to call “quite the character.” The two girls who interviewed her during the last period of the school day said they never got out of her room in time to get back to school before the final bell rang. She was definitely a ‘talker’. According to Andrea and Brooke, ““We began the interview by asking Virginia how many brothers and sisters she had. An hour later, she had not only told us her entire life history but the history of most of her relatives. We never got to our second question!”” (English, “Do You”, 19). What can’t be shown here is the actual web page designed by the girls—a site with links to the various places Speich names. In 1997, there weren’t a lot of well-developed websites, but these two girls found sites for the colleges and areas she mentions. Here is an excerpt of their narrative:

Virginia Speich was born on June 8, 1907, in Stockham, Nebraska.

Virginia’s father, Tobias Speich, married Beverly Hefty when they were both nineteen years old. Tobias’s brother, Emmanuel, started the first free rural mail delivery system on the Great Plains. When Emmanuel offered Tobias a job as one of the two mail carriers in Nebraska, he gladly accepted and moved his family to Stockham.

According to Virginia, she lived in Stockham when ‘Stockham was Stockham,’ with 400 inhabitants, a hospital, and nearly twelve trains passing through each day. In fact, one of the great pastimes Stockham children enjoyed was watching passengers get off the trains. Virginia lived in Stockham until she left for college in 1925.

After Virginia completed high school in Stockham, she left home to take courses at Peru State College, which was a summer school at the time.

When she left Peru State College, a friend asked her to fill a teaching position in Kearney, Nebraska. Virginia agreed, and at eighteen, began her first teaching job.

When Virginia arrived in Kearney, she was taken to a pasture where horses and donkeys were grazing and was told to cross the pasture to reach her schoolhouse. So Virginia began to cross the pasture, but when she was almost across, the animals charged at her. Making a split second decision, Virginia dropped to the ground and rolled under a fence into a ditch and then continued on her way to the school house. When Virginia finally arrived at the school, she found a course of study waiting for her. The course of study contained plans for two years, even and odd. Virginia had never seen a course of study before, so she wasn't sure which year she was supposed to be teaching! Eventually, she picked a year and began teaching in her one-room Kearney schoolhouse.

One day, Virginia was late getting to school, and some boys broke the lock on the school door. Virginia had been told that she must keep the door locked at all times. With the lock broken, she had to place a board across the inside of the door. But with the door locked from the inside Virginia was forced to crawl through a high window in order to get in and out of the schoolhouse. After a while, Virginia thought better of this plan, and hired a schoolboy to do this chore for her.

Virginia taught in Kearney for nine months, then went back to college for a few months. After college, she spent a year at home, doing odd jobs

and nanny work. Eventually, she began teaching again. She spent eleven years teaching in schools throughout the Sandhills of Nebraska.

At one point, a member of Virginia's school board asked Virginia to take his son on as student teacher. Virginia agreed, and at the age of twenty, added, 'teacher of teachers' to her list of accomplishments.

After many years spent deep in the Sandhills, Virginia took a teaching job at Chadron State College. On her first day there, she was introduced as a teacher of history, social sciences, and education. Virginia taught these three subjects at Chadron State for twenty-seven years.

As a place conscious educator, several aspects of this narrative stand out. Speich was proud of her career, her family and home town. She acknowledges the community of Stockham (now a population of 75) and her family including her father's vocation as one of the first rural mail carriers. This mention of community ties pays homage to the place and people who shaped who she became: a life-long educator. Speich took great pride in her career because it is the clear focus of more than three-fourths of the narrative.

The narrative also includes some anecdotal information about her early days of teaching. I wonder what she left out, and why she chose to include these stories. I'm also not sure if my students chose these stories over others, and if so, why? Assuming Speich chose these stories, it certainly appeals to her sense of history, because she must have felt it important for these two adolescent girls to know a few stories about the "way things used to be," including the fact that she had less than a year of college courses before beginning her teaching career. As a former history teacher, she was still teaching and helping the past come alive for them and herself.

During the interviews at the nursing home, I walked around from room to room to check up on my students, but I didn't have the opportunity to sit in on any one of them for an extended period. I would have liked to have been there, to see the look of contentment on Virginia Speich's face as she told her story as a ninety-year-old. Speich was a remnant of the early educator in Nebraska, where one room school houses were common especially in the Sandhills, where students traveled from many miles away. She was one of the few teachers left who chose to remain single, devoting her life to her students. Speich's story conveys her sense of belonging as an educator in rural Nebraska. Her citizenship is displayed by her commitment to education and her ability to guide her students.

Many of the stories gathered by my students included historical anecdotes. Dennis, Brady, and Jeremiah captured a story about the infamous Dirty Thirties from Merna Wall:

We then asked about the Dirty Thirties. She had a lot to say. It was all dirty all the time. When they woke up, they would have dirt and grime in their eyes, and dirt on their nose and lips. They didn't have electricity so they didn't have a fan, so their days were very hot, and the nights were cooler so they would sleep with the window open a little bit. When they got up in the morning, there would be a lot of dirt on the floor and they would have to walk through it. They had oak floors and the dirt and sand would be rough on their feet. They couldn't eat breakfast till they had washed the table first, because there would be a layer of dirt on it.

Most elderly residents of Hamilton County, Nebraska, can recall the horrible dust storms from the 1930's, but not everyone can say they had a run-in with famous bank robbers. Jessica M. and Jessica D. elicited an exciting memory from Eveleen Callies:

Eveleen tried to get any job that was available, so she found a job in a bank; her main job was being a bank teller . . . The Dillinger Gang, led by John Dillinger, came into the bank, setting out to rob it. Some of the gang members had already 'cased the joint' by coming into the bank and the surrounding businesses a few days earlier and asked some questions. One of the businesses adjacent to the bank was the Western Union where Eveleen's husband worked. Eveleen's husband accommodated their questions with very accurate answers, of course. He didn't know who they were.

The Dillinger Gang then proceeded to rob the bank. When they entered the bank, there was an older couple who were the janitors. They were told to get down on the floor, but the woman said, 'Oh, I can't; I have rheumatism!' The gangster pointed the gun at her and said, 'O.K. grandma . . . sit over there!' Following orders, she did it only to say later that it was the scariest moment of her life.

These two stories illustrate how engaging in community based projects can surprise us because we may meet residents who actually lived the history we have read about in a text book (or two) throughout our education. It is one thing to read about the Dirty Thirties or John Dillinger in a small paragraph in a school text, but it's another more meaningful experience to sit within two feet of someone telling us about it, giving

us the emotional and intellectual power of the moment. Students gained respect for these individuals because they grasped, “This person lived through these times.” Students witnessed the nursing home residents’ emotions and how the events impacted their lives and then realized these elderly citizens were able to survive great challenges. The truths of their lives became real for these adolescents. This sharing of stories is one of Bellah’s practices of commitment, a ritual as old as human existence.

Not all stories contained historical anecdotes but some helped students imagine a time that was very different than today. One of my favorite stories came from the oldest resident we interviewed, Mary Quinn, who at 105 recalled a story from her adolescence. Mary’s was a poignant story. It’s striking because for the first half of her narrative, there are two paragraphs about her family history, marriage, life’s work, and a brief mention of her still living daughter and the fact that she outlived her son, but then there is a shift. The shift occurs when she becomes more emotionally engaged in the story. The two girls who interviewed her, B.J. and Jocelyn, titled her story, “The Necklace”:

One Saturday evening around Christmas, her family left to go somewhere, but she decided to stay home by herself because she didn’t want to go wherever they were going. After the rest of her family left, she was sitting out in the yard. All of a sudden she saw this horse and buggy drive right up to where she was across from her big yard. Driving this good looking horse and buggy was her boyfriend. She particularly liked horses and her boyfriend had the prettiest looking one.

Then he asked her to go for a ride around town. She accepted his offer and they rode around town for quite a little while. He brought her back to

her house after touring the town and gave her her Christmas gift. It was their first Christmas together. She was between the ages of 18 and 20. She opened the gift and found a pretty little necklace.

Mary kept the necklace even though her mother didn't like the boy. In spite of her mother's disapproval, she kept on seeing him, but after a year they ended their relationship. She isn't exactly sure where the necklace is now, but she thinks her daughter might have it.

It surprised me she shared such a personal story so willingly. Perhaps being surrounded by teenage girls helped trigger memories of her own adolescence. One of the difficulties interviewing the very elderly is triggering their memories. My students were told this by our visiting scholars and the nursing home director. Luckily, one of the girls, Jocelyn, was the nursing home director's daughter so she made Mrs. Quinn feel comfortable. Jocelyn had visited with Quinn on many occasions, so trust had been established, allowing Mary to speak from the heart. The story also strikes me because when I consider the time period, it was probably considered scandalous that she went on a horse and buggy ride alone with a man! She also expressed her independence by continuing to date the man and keeping the necklace after all those years. Robert Coles writes that "a memory is, of course, a story" (183), and helping the elderly regain that story is a means to enrich their lives. In his work, *The Call of Stories*, Coles recalls a passage that explains the importance of sustaining good memories in our lives from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, a book cherished by him and both of his parents:

My dear children...you must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some

good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If one carries many such memories into life, one is safe to the end of one's days, and if one has only one good memory left in one's heart, even that may be the means of saving us. (183)

All of the stories captured the voice of each resident, and remarkably, my students did stay true to that precious voice. My students provided “*pneuma*—breath-spirit” (Elbow 315). They miraculously did what Peter Elbow says good writers must do: “get *experience* out of words, not just meaning” (315). What I wanted for my students from this place conscious project was to write with “*real voice* [which] has the power to make you pay attention and understand” (299). In “A Sense of Place,” Sharon Bishop writes that “Student learning anywhere is deepened when they use the stories of their place to communicate that learning. When students must represent the words and experiences of others whom they have interviewed,...they are more careful and creative writers” (Brooke 81). David Sobel surmises similarly, “What is notable from our close observation of student work that has an embedded quality—meaning that the student is in the community, researching aspects of its history, learning about local lore...is the quality of the work deepens greatly, is more carefully attended to, assumes genuine meaning” (12).

My students had to bring together snippets and pieces of memories to quilt together a coherent narrative of each nursing home resident. In sifting through these pieces of language they created genuine stories that honored our eldest residents and the

residents, in turn, helped my students discover something about their writing selves. This collaborative effort gave my students “opportunities to be, as well as to be seen as, activists for the common good” (Dyson qtd. in Heller xv). I think this is getting at the intradependence Theobald speaks of, living lives in the service of our community rather than merely focusing on our individual selves. Intradependence is a reciprocal relationship.

Instilling a Sense of Belonging

Brooke states that this aspect of living well “involves the collective meaning in which one locates one’s life along a continuum of heritage to an imagined future that one shares with others” (12). What did my students discover about the collective meaning of their lives? Students learned that there are many people that make up our community and each person has a history and has made some kind of contribution to our community for its benefit, which ultimately has benefitted them. What have they learned about their heritage? Students learned that living in Nebraska during the Great Depression was heartbreaking and arduous. Many of us inherited our forbearers’ work ethic and similar moral values. Many of us maintain a strong faith and a belief in The Golden Rule. What about my students’ own ‘imagined futures’? Students learned that if the nursing home residents were able to make a living and live well in this place, so could they. They, too, could maintain a culture where one could earn a college degree and teach for a lifetime, work in a bank, own a business, fall in love, or overcome adversity. Their imagined future is one of hope and promise that this locale, with the proper love and care, can sustain them well into the future.

Theobold wanted education to be “centered around civic issues, history, biology, economics, literature and so forth,” but he also wanted one that “immersed learners into the life of human communities *while they were still in school*, thereby teaching the practice of civic involvement which [is] fundamental for a democracy like ours” (Brooke 6). Two guiding principles of place conscious education are “maximize ownership through partnerships and engage students in real-world projects in the local environment and community” (Sobel 52). I wanted my student learners to stand “*within* the world, acting on its many elements, rather than standing outside looking in” (Sobel 11). I believe “Elderly Voices—Living Links to the Past” embodied the principles of place consciousness and helped my students comprehend civic engagement. It was my educator’s leap into restoring a sense of community through guiding my students to a deeper understanding of what it means to belong to a place. The act of interviewing, listening, and writing about the lives of citizens who are often marginalized in a community is a form of social action. Our concern was to hear and respect elderly voices.

Collecting and preserving the stories of the elderly is what Wigginton would describe as a “big job indeed” but it is the job of “everyone from whom young people gain knowledge” (Haas and Nachtigal 24). Wigginton writes that the best teachers build within students “personal traits such as curiosity, self-confidence, independence, and self-esteem” and move students “beyond self into a caring relationship with humanity and the environment and a sense of interdependence of all life...to see things whole” (24). Stone also writes that “preparing young people for sustainable living requires educators who can touch and influence the whole student, including his or her values, abilities and relationship to the natural world” (44). My students may not fully conceptualize a sense

of belonging just yet, but I do hope they can “live well in community” wherever they go.

I hope they may someday play a vital role in their own villages, towns, and cities and be open to a place conscious educator in their midst who might come knocking on their doors and ask them to participate and co-create with her students. I hope they will recognize and believe what I believe:

There is a potential to involve the whole community in the education of children. This is a unique thing. It is a departure from most people sending kids off to the school and trusting local educators. If everyone feels they have a hand in education, it will lead to a lot of support for education in the local schools—if everyone has some degree of ownership. (Fontaine qtd. in Sobel 52-53)

Chapter 2

Living Well Spiritually—A Sense of Connection

I cannot have a spiritual center without having a geographical one; I cannot live a grounded life without being grounded in a *place*. —Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying*

Put: Making a Home in a Restless World

Making Spiritual Connections

In a public school, instilling a sense of living well spiritually must be handled with care and open-mindedness. Aurora is a very religious community with many Christian churches in several denominations, but we also have a close-knit group of people of the Bahá'í Faith who strongly support intellectual and artistic endeavors and advocate education for sustainability through spiritual means. Haas and Nachtigal acknowledge that for many years in American education, spirituality was not considered appropriate for public schools because it was a private matter. However, they have recognized that “living well includes this important transcendent dimension and that Spirit...also forms the ecological context through which to observe and integrate those understandings, bodies of knowledge and practices resulting from direct interaction with the natural world” (17).

For Haas and Nachtigal living well spirituality is linked to the land and these “connections are active, not passive...all living things are connected and demand mutual respect” (18). They also cite Gregory Cajete’s *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* who notes that nature-centered spirituality is the essence of indigenous people’s lives for ““discovering one’s true face (character, potential, identity),

heart (soul, creative self, true passion), and foundation (true work, vocation), all of which lead to the expression of a complete life” (50). In *Rural Voices: Place Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*, Robert Brooke explains this sense as “primarily a person’s way of understanding the connections and relationships that form a life, whether or not that understanding is based in any given institutionalized religion...students should know the major ways people in their region have articulated such an understanding of connections” (12).

David Gruenewald names this sense the perceptual dimension of place, acknowledging that “human beings enter into a participatory relationship with other phenomena through multisensory perception of direct experience” (“Foundations” 624). He cites ecological theologian Thomas Berry who says that human beings have forgotten how to “hear, communicate, and participate in meaning making with our places on the living earth” (624). Gruenewald advocates a “phenomenology of perception” in order to care for the “cultural and ecological lives of places and understanding how one place is connected to others” (624). Concerning the state of education, he writes:

Schools must develop strategies that better enable students and teachers to perceive places that are alive in the human and more-than-human world...schools potentially stunt human development as they help construct our lack of awareness of, our lack of connection to, and our lack of appreciation for places. (625)

Education for sustainability includes this emphasis on spirituality or the perceptual dimension. Stone writes that spiritual sustenance is connectional and advocates that students “experience wonder and awe towards nature, revere the Earth and

all living things, feel a strong bond with and deep appreciation of place, and feel kinship with the natural world and invoke that feeling in others” (44). Dimity Podger cites Fritjof Capra who founded the Center for Ecoliteracy in the United States. Capra calls for “competencies of the head, heart, hands, and *spirit*, each of which is considered necessary for ‘children to develop toward becoming citizens capable of designing and maintaining sustainable societies’” (67) [Emphasis Podger].

Podger also notes that the US Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development (USPESD) committee entitled the Faith Sector Team suggests that educators should be “nurturing beliefs in the essential dignity and nobility of human beings to stimulate recognition of interconnectedness, [and] nurturing reverent connections with nature and raising awareness for voluntary simplicity to generate a counter culture to materialism and consumerism” (68). In arguing for education for sustainability that includes a spiritual dimension, Podger cites Selby who “holds that spirituality is a motivating force for action toward sustainability, and suggests that educational endeavors draw on the knowledge systems of religion as well as science” (66).

Throughout my adult life I have written many pages to articulate this connection between nature and my sense of a spiritual life. I specifically wrote about my personal quest for understanding these connections in my master’s thesis centered on discovering the divine in the geographical landscape through reflections upon vision quests within Lakota spirituality and the Benedictine monastic tradition. In doing so, I discovered that “we all approach the spiritual connection to the landscape in significantly different ways” (Cave-English 4). I am deeply connected to a sense of place:

For me, someone who has lived her whole life on the Plains, it is a love for a blizzard's beauty and terror and its white world splendor after the storm. It is a love for its cool autumns with warm colors and the smells of plowed earth in the spring...It is listening and observing and discovering the holy in the landscape others may overlook. It's meeting the divine in the landscape day to day and noticing the subtle changes. It's seeing the gaze of God in others who live out their lives here. (Cave-English 4-5)

Kathleen Norris first shaped my understanding of personal purpose in dwelling in a geographical space. She left New York City to return to her cultural roots in South Dakota to reclaim her spiritual geography, the place where she “wrestled [her] story out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance” (2). She writes, “I had to stay in this place, like a scarecrow in a field, and hope for the rains to see its beauty” (3). Linda Hogan acknowledges the importance of serving our bioregion because we have a responsibility as caretakers of the future and “to other species who share our journeys” (11). She explains, “I write out of respect for the natural world, recognizing that humankind is not separate from nature...there is a terrestrial intelligence that lies beyond our human knowledge and grasping” (11-12). Wendell Berry emphasizes that “our biological roots as well as our cultural roots are in nature” (29). Berry writes that we must know the land and preserve it:

If we are to be properly humble in our use of the world, we need places that we do not use at all. We need the experience of leaving places alone. We need what other ages would have called sacred groves. We need groves, anyhow, that we would treat as if they were sacred—in order,

perhaps to perceive their sanctity...only if we know how the land *was* can we tell how it *is*. (30)

Making sense of these spiritual connections is an ongoing endeavor. Understanding how our ordinary lives intertwine with others and nature is a lifelong process. It takes practice; one must observe, act, and reflect upon these connections. Writing about these observations, actions and reflections help us understand what is sacred in our landscape.

...So it [is] for many of us—going back, way back, to the earliest of times, when men and women and children looked at one another, at the land, at the sky, at the rivers and oceans, at the mountains and deserts, at animals and plants, and wondered, as it is our nature to do: what is all this that I see and hear and find unfolding before me? How shall I comprehend the life that is in me and around me? To do so, stories were constructed—and told, and remembered, and handed down over time, over generations.

(Coles 189)

To help my students comprehend their own connections, I continually ask them to write their stories in some form or another. As the poet W.H. Auden said, “‘How can I know what I mean until I see what I say?’” (Leslie, et al, 25). When students write their own stories, they begin to comprehend more clearly how they need to “experience forming and exploring their own [spiritual] connections” (Brooke 12). Over the years, I have had students approach these spiritual connections by asking them to write about special people and places in their lives through various writing prompts, including “I remember” essays, sense of place essays, parodies of George Ella Lyon’s “Where I’m From” poem, deep maps, and writing marathons. In this chapter I focus on the deep map

exercise and the writing marathon because they best exemplify how I have asked students to understand connections to their place in order to care for it culturally and ecologically. Through these writing activities students are given an opportunity to articulate the value and purpose of their lives and place through language familiar to them in their specific faith traditions. I want them to see the enduring value of maintaining the ecological health of this region and find personal purpose in dwelling and serving in this region.

Connections through Deep Mapping

My students begin the fall semester constructing deep maps beginning with vital questions from Robert Thayer, professor emeritus of landscape architecture at the University of California-Davis who says we all have three “life questions,” that is, “Who am I?” “Where am I?” and “What am I supposed to do?” Thayer writes that these questions cannot be considered separately, but as a place conscious educator, I am especially interested in the question of place or where we are.

The question ‘Where are we?’ has a deep, sustaining ring to it. It is a simple question with a deceptively complex answer. To some readers, we are where our address is--our street, city, county, state, and nation. To a few others, we are in some division of territory, on earth, perhaps marked by a particular topography and climate. Many others might find the question absurd: How are we to answer? We are at many locations at different times. Planners, landscape architects, geographers and others occupied with mapping, planning, or designing places are supposedly more aware of ‘where they are’ than most—yet how deeply do any of us really know where we are? (Thayer 2)

Like Thayer notes, my students can tell me their home address, city, state and nation because they have memorized those facts since they were very small children. Understanding who you are in a psychological sense in a considered space or as a citizen in a community, in a specific geographical space isn't as easy. Robert Brooke and Jason McIntosh define a deep map:

A deep map is a map of the place where you are now, showing what makes up that place, indicating the forces that have led you to be the kind of person you are in that place, representing the tensions which create the energy of that place (positive and negative). A deep map represents understanding of location, not just description. A deep map represents celebration and critique of where you locate yourself. (141-142)

Students are instructed to draw maps that analyze a version of their mental maps. They are asked to describe how the spaces we inhabit are cognitively ordered through our experiences of those places. Some of them draw landmarks and buildings and other concrete structures as artifacts about their place. Once they draw their deep maps, I ask them to analyze what they have drawn by writing a one to two page "legend" for their map, considering some of these questions:

What images and/or locations are most prominent on your map? What is the centermost 'thing' on your map? What is at the edges of your map? Why? Is the place you currently inhabit concentrated in one part of your city? Does it extend beyond the city limits? What people or groups of people do you associate with different locations on your map? What places do you walk, ride, or drive by regularly but never enter (outdoor

and indoor places)? What plants and animals inhabit your map? Who does not inhabit your map? What is not on your map? List three places you would like to know more about so that you include them on your map. What would you title your map? How would you describe the place in which you live to others? What do you most like about your map?

Dislike?

I show students examples of my own deep maps because I have created more than one map in my career. One map was created in a graduate course centered on place conscious teaching and took the shape of a large tree with the roots representing all of the people of my past, grandparents, parents, siblings, teachers, priests, and friends who were the foundation of my life and who influenced my identity. The trunk of the tree represented my journey in life with marriage, children and adult friends, and the branches of the tree represented all aspects of my life: students, mentors, places I had traveled, books I love, and things I have learned. In the background, there is a river that runs through my life which represents the importance of the Platte River as a constant in my life.

The most recent deep map I share with my students I created a few years ago. It is in the form of a green peace sign which represents two important things about me: one, I love peace, hence the peace sign, and two, I love the earth, hence the choice of the color green. The peace sign has three distinct areas representing the three questions posed by Thayer. One section depicts where I am with drawings of my home and other nearby places, Interstate 80, the Platte River, and various buildings; another section depicts who I am: teacher, scholar, spouse, and mother (and now it needs to be revised to depict a new

role of grandmother); and finally, a section depicting my purpose with a drawing of a rock dropping into a lake creating a ripple. In my legend, I wrote:

In the tornado-looking lake, I have a big black rock which is supposed to depict me, being dropped into a lake, making ripples. The ripple effect is to remind me that each of us has a purpose and that purpose is quite far-reaching, like ripples in a lake, that expand out into a vast area. That is what teaching is all about. We affect one student at a time, but that affect is far-reaching. It is a ripple. That student (for good or for bad, unfortunately) affects another human being, and that person, another and so on. Above the lake, I have a very large sunrise that is reflected or echoed several times, to depict the same effect of the ripple in the reflection off a lake. In a nutshell, my purpose is extraordinary and far-reaching. I then wrote the words, 'Blessed is the influence of one true loving human soul on another' by George Eliot. I think those words sum up what I was trying to depict about my purpose or vocation in this life.

In writing about my purpose, I depict connectedness to others, nurturing the belief in the "essential dignity and nobility of human beings" that Podger acknowledges. I used a metaphor from nature to explain a sense of connection to others and how that connection is far reaching. I explain to my students that even though I have created more than one deep map, two essential beliefs emerge from both renditions. One is the importance of identity grounded in particular places, especially places in nature such as the Platte River and the other is a sense of purpose and the influence of others upon my life.

It's important for students to know that their own deep map might change in its physical appearance in what they might represent, because we do experience growth, and our beliefs and perceptions in life continue to transform with our physical and psychological growth over time. We recognize that no matter what age we are, spiritual connections continue to emerge in our quest "to be." Our deep maps and our lives are not static, but drawing our place and writing about it grounds us in a particular way. As John Talmadge writes, "A place is nothing more than a space with a story, and the basic question in all nature writing is, 'What happened here?'" (Leslie, et al, 24).

Sharing my writing establishes a very important trust in a writing relationship. It lets my students just know about me, and how I, too, am still forming and exploring spiritual connections through my writing. I am still contemplating who I am, where I am and my purpose. This respect for each others' stories is a key in every classroom, and although my own classroom is not a diverse classroom like one in an urban setting, we still each have a unique story to tell. Vito Perrone writes, "As [children] touch the earth, observe the culture that surrounds them, listen to their stories, and speak they are achieving a personal relationship with the world" (2).

The English classroom is ideal for instilling this sense of living well spiritually because of its emphasis on writing, particularly expressive writing where students are encouraged to share their observations about the world and their connections to it. Proponents of expressive writing like Perrone, Peter Elbow, Lucy McCormick Calkins, Barry Lane, Tom Romano and others advocate writing for understanding and values clarification. This is the type of writing that emerges when students explore connections to the natural world. Lane writes, "finding a voice is a slow process that begins with

teaching students to value their own experiences and to write them down” (159). Perrone states that “engaging students means taking them seriously, acknowledging that they are trying to understand the world in which they live and that what is studied in school must make connections to that underlying intention” (27).

Although I did not specifically mention any particular religious faith in the deep map legend essay I shared with my students, most students regarded their faith as an important aspect of their identities that grounded them in a particular place. Two students, Alyssa and LeAnna, were particularly articulate about using their faith “language” to express a sense of identity. Both have been part of the community most of their lives. Alyssa, who moved back to Nebraska when she was four, comes from a devout evangelical Christian background and LeAnna comes from a devout Latter Day Saints (Mormon) background. What stood out about these two young ladies were their deep map drawings. Alyssa drew a large fingerprint in black that contained the image of her face with important words written in color within the lines of the fingerprint. LeAnna’s drawing was a vibrant colorful painting of the Superman symbol as its focal point surrounded by other images connected to her identity but especially drawings of her father and her siblings. Both had a strong sense of who they were. Alyssa wrote in her legend titled “Fingerprints of My Life”:

My deep map depicts me in a distinct and unique way. At first glance you see a fingerprint; but, if you look deeper you see a face. My face. In life you might find someone who looks similar to you, but no one in the entire world has the same fingerprint as you. We are all distinctively different: some are artistic, some are performers, some are athletes, and

some are intellectual. Each of us has something different to offer the world.

I wrote all of the words in color unlike my black fingerprint because the words brought my fingerprint to life. We are all given a fingerprint from birth, but the question is ‘What mark will we make upon the world?’ The words took a simple pattern of lines and added character as each expressed a different facet of who I am as a person. In some places you can see words such as encourager, leader, smile, positivity, etc. These are all words that I believe make up my life and the ideals that I want to live by.

Alyssa’s use of a fingerprint exemplifies something about life in a small town: it’s risky business expressing oneself uniquely. Yes, she indeed wants to leave her mark upon the world, but in small town Nebraska, most students blend together into homogeneity. She wants to be noted as unique in an environment that constantly reminds her that to be accepted, she has to blend in, be grouped and labeled and stereotyped. She wants the reader to know she is not like everyone else. Yet, later in the essay she also acknowledges that here in rural Nebraska, we are the way we live and our choices and our community influences who we become.

LeAnna’s sense of identity was depicted in her piece titled “Life Legend”:

[There] is of a torch with a woman’s face as the flames. This expresses myself as a daughter of God and that I love my religion and its effect on my life. Next to religion I have my family. Being a part of this simple but wonderful collection of people has been a complete joy for me. Just south of my *Young Woman* emblem is a breast cancer ribbon. In recent years,

and for sensitive personal reasons, I have become an advocate of breast cancer awareness. Just as much as I think being aware of social issues is important, I also believe that being active in community activities is also very beneficial. My choice of participation is in FFA. And thus there is a picture of my FFA jacket. Being a part of FFA has brought me great joy throughout my high school career.

LeAnna also wrote about her family and her love of art, a predominant talent in her family. Her poignant mention of breast cancer awareness is a private tribute to her mother who died from the disease in the fall of her junior year. LeAnna's mention of FFA signifies a sense of uniqueness because in identifying with this organization she is acknowledging something about the place she lives. She distinguishes her rural roots in contrast to a student living in an urban or suburban setting. In the past, FFA stood for Future Farmers of America, but even that has changed in recent history. The organization, established in 1928, changed its name to the National FFA Organization in 1988 to "better reflect the expanded agricultural opportunities encompassing science, business and technology, in addition to production farming" (National FFA).

Both girls closely identified with their family's religion and acknowledged its lasting impact upon their lives. This emphasis on their faith tradition also identifies their locale because people in small towns in rural areas take their religion and the practice of it very seriously. Many families attend church services on a regular basis and some family's lives revolve around the church as they participate in choirs, youth groups, bible studies, Sunday school, vacation bible school, and mission trips. In rural areas with small congregations, this active involvement is vital to the livelihood of a church.

Many students find it difficult to write about who they are, because they are still trying to figure that out as seniors in high school. Most write about their families, their religion, and the many activities they are involved in as what often defines them. Writing in response to the question, “Where am I” was somewhat easier but lacked depth and was limited to “I live in Aurora, Nebraska,” or focused even more closely on the high school building, their homes, their bedrooms or the places they worked. Many students wrote about structures where they participated in an extracurricular activity: the football field, the gym, the band room, the track, the wrestling mats, and the theater. A few students, who have recreational experiences on the Platte River, drew depictions of the river, the well known sand bars or islands of the river, or images of themselves in large inner tubes, indicating they had “tubed” the Platte.

In her deep map legend, Alyssa wrote only two specific sentences about her sense of place: “Where am I? Well, physically, I’m in Aurora, NE but this place is simply a building block, foundational to my future and dreams.” She later wrote, “Right now, I’m in small town Nebraska but sooner than I know I will be leaving this place to go make my mark.” She doesn’t mention that she lived on a farm approximately fifteen miles southwest of Aurora in a farm house her grandpa designed and built. Her father was raised there and helped develop it. After his parents died her family moved back to Nebraska to take over the family business. Her father has a tenant who has the machinery and farms the land but her father manages the day to day business decisions and assists the tenant at harvest. Alyssa’s family is more closely tied to the land than most of her counterparts, so it’s surprising that she doesn’t mention it or other structures on the farmstead, or plants, or animals. Her family isn’t directly engaged in farming throughout

the entire year, so ‘where’ she is isn’t so obvious, but she did tell me later that her father had a huge love of farming, something she didn’t inherit. She wrote, “I love the place, but not the job.”

In many ways Alyssa defies the stereotype so many others around the country hold of Nebraskans: we all live on farms, raise livestock and grow a lot of corn. There is a sense of disengagement with the land conveyed in her essay, and I’m not sure why. She later wrote saying that when she was working on her deep map she was in the process of touring colleges and had her mind focused on the future. She said she felt the three questions weren’t looking for concrete answers but about her inner person. Why didn’t she write about the farm house? The number of acres? The crops planted? What’s outside her kitchen window? The animals, domestic and wild, she might see? In a reflection she wrote, “I was leaving for a new place and the farm wasn’t coming with me. I felt the other parts on my deep map were more important than my physical place.”

Alyssa’s response exemplifies Gruenewald’s argument about the characteristics of our educational experience: “our ability to perceive places can be either thwarted or fostered by educational experience. Because the structures and processes of schooling are based on institutional patterns of isolating teachers and students from places outside the school, one can claim that schools limit experience and perception” (625). As a place conscious educator, it makes me contemplate how I might better frame the questions in the deep map assignment to elicit responses about specific geographical places and structures. How can I more fully instill a spiritual connection to the land through classroom activities that “acknowledge that places themselves have something to say...[that] human beings ...must learn to listen (and otherwise perceive)?” (624).

LeAnna's consideration of place included mention of her house and school:

Traveling through life can be a complex and stressful journey for some people, but as for myself I find it going in a straight path. That is why there is one road going through the entire landscape of 'where am I.' It all begins at my house. Just down the road is a drawing of school—this is where my life is currently. Not far from high school is college, and this is where I am hoping to find answers to the questions that still remain about my future. With those hopes and dreams in mind, I have pictured my future abode to be a castle. Myself, being only a few miles along my journey, and with still much to travel through, I will always stay steadfast and never stray from my values.

LeAnna's imaginative way of looking to the future is interesting because a castle is all about security, strength and the prince "prize" so prevalent in our mythology and the ever popular Disney rendition of a happy ending. She also speaks of a road, and as we know, a road is a physical thing in the landscape of our lives, but I wish she had taken the time to stop, look around from that road and notice her immediate vicinity and consider its implication on the landscape, developing an ecological perception of her locale.

Like my students, it has been difficult for me to map out a connection to the landscape and to live well spiritually. It isn't easy to develop a perceptual dimension of place—to comprehend that other species are important and that the land is important. Today's schools do not encourage us to observe our natural surroundings. Our high school policy discourages us from leaving the building. That's why so many students wrote about places associated with the school. Writing in the classroom elicits a focus on

school-based places. If we are to sustain our ecological futures, we need to conceptualize sustainability that is “not only indefinitely prolonged, but nourishing, as the Earth is nourishing to life, and as a healthy environment is nourishing for the self actualization of persons and communities” (qtd. in Owens 26). If I can help students make better sense of where they are, they may understand how important it is to care deeply enough to nourish and prolong this geographical place for the good of all of its inhabitants. Tom Wessels writes, “Only when we understand the heritage of the land, the linkages between culture and nature, and are able to interpret that heritage, does a real sense of place become possible” (Leslie, et al 59).

Because many of my students have been raised with a strong faith tradition, this should open the door to a sense of respect for the land in terms of stewardship. A few generations ago, many Hamilton County farmers would have been well aware of this meaning and some still live by this philosophy. Many families still live off the land through farming, hunting and fishing. Students in rural areas, especially Nebraska, can look out the windows of their schools and homes and see acres and acres of farmland. There is no better place to initiate this sense of living well spiritually than rural Nebraska.

There is a mixed reaction from my students to Thayer’s third question, “What is my purpose?” Many students use words like “mystery, undecided, foggy, dunno,” and just as many write about their immediate purpose, being a good big brother or sister, getting good grades, graduating from high school, and just simply being a good person. Others begin to contemplate their futures and imagine their purpose as getting a very good job and making a lot of money. Still others believe their purpose in life is to help

others or live out their faith through action. Alyssa and LeAnna both found their purpose in life in this last example. Alyssa wrote:

[My] purpose is to serve God with all I have every day, to love people in a real way, and take the time to reach out to those who have no one. If I live for God, someone greater than myself, I will find a purpose and be truly fulfilled. I will bring Him glory through my life as I seek His guidance for the tasks He planned for me before I was even created. I want to leave a legacy.

Alyssa has established a perceptual dimension of sustaining her culture. What is important to her is maintaining the religious culture that has greatly influenced her life and firmly established her purpose but one that would take her away from this place: she planned to become a missionary in a third world country. She understood vocation in the truest sense of the word. I find it interesting that at age nineteen she had already considered that she wanted to leave a legacy. Even though she didn't name what the legacy will be, she implied she wanted her vocation to be a gift, an example as a guide for her family's future generations.

LeAnna, too, had deep convictions, centered more on her family. She wrote:

'To be a hero to my future family.' This is what I know to be the purpose of my soul. Even though I have other goals for my future, I try to live my life in the present, so that I can be the one my children will call their hero. The decisions that I choose to make now will be the determining factors of who I will share the rest of my life, meaning my husband, friends, associates, and especially my children. As I grow older, I

see that regardless of age, you can always learn something new. I know that just as I will become a mentor for my future family, they will reciprocate it for me. Not only will they have me for a hero but they will be mine as well. This is my 'soul' purpose in my life.

Her Superman symbol dominated her deep map. It is intriguing that she chose this symbol and that her purpose is to be a hero to her family. Lindsay E. Rankin and Alice H. Eagly of Northwestern University conducted a study on the social construction of heroism:

[It] examined how the social construction of heroism affects the representation of women and men as heroes. In the first study, community participants defined heroism or identified heroes. Although the most common defining elements of heroism were benefiting others, acting selflessly, and confronting risk, participants reported more male than female public heroes. However, when naming heroes whom they personally know, participants represented women and men equally. (414)

Rankin and Eagly's study revealed that most of our public heroes are male because that kind of heroism is based upon risk taking, typically rescuing someone, e.g. a fireman or policeman, usually a male with great physical strength, but when people considered their own personal heroes, many more were women who met difficult challenges. They write, "Women emerged relatively more often as heroes who were personally known to participants...the most common types of heroes were people who met challenges and [were] family guardians. People who meet challenges, such as fighting cancer, for example, may serve as role models of courageous endurance" (421).

LeAnna's understanding of the concept hero was actualized in her mother's example. The Latin derivative of hero is *severe* which means to protect or more so, to serve. This Latin etymology of this word embodies what LeAnna meant by choosing this image and these words. She wants to be like her mother who truly was a hero who battled cancer with a magnanimous will to live. It displays how adamantly LeAnna is trying in her present moment, as her immediate purpose, to be that hero for her three younger siblings, left without a mother. LeAnna is already mindful of the impact she might have developing future citizens.

Because the deep map was first a visual representation, students were more successful at developing a written representation. Once they had the visual map on paper, it was much easier for them to describe and define each representation and what their symbols meant. Writing from deep maps allowed students to see something about themselves and reflect about the interrelationship of who they are, where they are and what their purpose is, perceiving the connectedness emphasized in living well spiritually. However, because they were created in the isolation of a high school classroom, they were limiting, especially when it comes to answering the question, "Where am I?" To elicit more descriptive and insightful expression of locale and the landscape, students need to be in those places. To write about their home, their hang-outs, their jobs, and their extracurricular activities, students need to be there and observe.

Connections through Writing Marathons

Several weeks after students created deep maps, I approached my principal and asked permission to leave the building so students could indeed observe some of the places and locales important to them through writing marathons. We conducted two

writing marathons, one that was conducted around the school premises and one to downtown Aurora to the courthouse square. In a writing marathon, student writers form into groups, deciding about what destinations they can agree upon. The group moves to the agreed upon sites and then members write for approximately ten minutes and then share their writing and then move to the next agreed upon site. When students share their writing at each of these stops, the most important guideline for them is that they cannot respond to the writing. They may shake their heads or say, “Thank you,” but that is the only kind of response they can give. They are to remain focused on observing and writing and not socializing.

The writing marathon was initiated in the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project in Hammond, Louisiana when a summer institute participant based her teaching demonstration upon Natalie Goldberg’s *Writing Down the Bones*. Melanie Plesh, the institute participant, asked her fellow teachers to write for several successive ten-minute sessions and then share their writing “with no comments by anyone...A pause naturally happens after each reader, but we do not say ‘That was great’ or even ‘I know what you mean.’ There is no good or bad, no praise or criticism” (Louth). Richard Louth, director of the writing project site, states that a few years later, this concept was expanded at a meeting of Louisiana teachers in New Orleans. He writes, “I wanted to do a marathon based on our site’s approach but knew that there were too many people to make it work. I knew also that after a morning of workshops, teachers would rather be on the streets of the French Quarter than writing in a hotel conference room.” So, he asked attendees to form their own groups and “released” them to the streets. These writers spent the day walking around New Orleans, picking spots to write, and then met for a final read around

at a designated location. Louth writes, “Miraculously, everyone returned, and when they did, they were somehow different. An excitement filled the room, a common bond that came from this strange experience.”

In my high school classes, a typical group may choose to go to the football field and the wrestling mats in the school-based writing marathon. When they have walked the ten blocks downtown, students in a group often select the courthouse and a local book store. Some have also written at the lumber yard, coffee shop, and floral shop. If the weather is nice, students often write on the courthouse lawn, near the bandstand, or at the tables outside the coffee shop. At the end of the school-based writing marathon, students meet in the classroom for the read aloud of one to two minutes of writing. When we venture downtown, we meet at the local coffee shop, Espressions, where they purchase a beverage and listen intently to each others’ writing and clap enthusiastically.

In the fall of 2011, several students commented that the writing marathon helped them make connections to their place but especially the memories associated with that place. This kind of connectional experience gets at Hass and Nachtigal’s concept of living well spiritually. Kori wrote, “I learned that we have many special memories and connections in various places. I noticed I made connections and wrote how I felt.” Anna wrote, “I forgot about some of these places, and maybe I should take the time to stop and look around. I made really good connections at the places.” Most students noted how the process taught them how to observe more closely and notice things in their surroundings. They noted that moving from place to place helped them think more closely about point of view and gave them new ideas. Students also recognized that even though they each wrote in a specific place, everyone in the group perceived the place in unique ways. Most

students highly favored the low stakes writing where no judgment of it was allowed. The final read around at the end elicited many favorable comments including, “It was fun to see what everyone wrote and to see them in a different light.”

One group visited the black granite war monuments on the west side of the courthouse, and one student, Sarah, submitted an essay titled “Taking a Second Look” based upon her writing marathon experience:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leafs a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down today.
Nothing gold can stay.

This poem by Robert Frost says it all. Just because something is beautiful now does not mean it will always be that way, or always was. This generalized statement can be applied to many circumstances, but in this case I’m sitting at the War Memorial on the court house lawn in Aurora, Nebraska.

It is a calm day, the sun is peaking out through the branches of the surrounding trees. The sounds of birds and automobiles are muffled by a slight breeze that blows my hair as I stare at a blank sheet of lined paper. I think about what’s around me. At first glance, people might see a few black stones with white writing and our nation’s flag in the middle of it all. Right now no one is stopping, no one is looking, no one is noticing.

I see so much stone, permanent, unfading, stone. The people who lost their lives so we could live ours normally. Beauty surrounds our heroes. Trees with branches so easy to climb, all in perfect lines, all different kinds. Creatures weaving in and out of tangled and curved branches, which shade the names of the dead. Bright green grass carpets the ground of the memorial. The contrast of the vivid green grass with the ebony monument makes the site breath-taking.

When it comes to something like this people don't want to look. They do not want to think about all the people that have died or will die for us and our country. I admit that this thought is sad but it should also give citizens a sense of loyalty to what protects us.

Sarah's juxtaposition of the inanimate monuments and statues with all of the living species, i.e. trees and creatures and other plants exemplifies the power that nature can have upon writers. In contrast to the deep mapping experience, the writing marathon elicited a very powerful conception of where she was. Her essay depicts quite specifically a locale because *she was in that place*. I can't help but wonder if Sarah would have ever written this piece if not for the writing marathon. The marathon allowed her an opportunity to make the kind of connections that Orr evinces as "something akin to spiritual renewal." It is a 'higher level of spiritual awareness' [that] is essential to stimulate the desire to sustain life" (Podger 66).

More than any other student, Sarah made a connection not only to the present of her immediate surroundings but to the past and the men and women who had served in the armed forces. Her perception moved beyond her present experience to contemplate

something outside herself, “feeling concern, empathy, and respect for other people”

(Stone 44). Richard Louth notes one of the powerful influences of the writing marathon is that the “setting shakes one up a bit—to be unfamiliar—and sometimes that happens not because it is a new place but simply because it is being seen through new eyes, a writer’s eye.” Sarah noticed the passage of time and its essence of change. Sarah, and all students, if given an opportunity to experience the natural world within an ecologically or environmentally based curriculum, may begin to get at this sense of spiritual sustainability where there is “interdependence and interconnection, in which self, others and nature are distinct, yet, parts of a whole...in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole, [and] ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest sense” (Podger 66-67).

Chapter 3

Living Well Economically—A Sense of Worth

Rural schools should teach how to create jobs, not just how to get jobs working for someone else. — Toni Haas and Paul Nachtigal,
Place Value

Sustaining an Economic Future

One of the biggest needs in any community is a job market. A community simply cannot progress without gainfully employed residents. To instill a sense of living well economically, Robert Brooke acknowledges,

To participate fully in a community, individuals need a livelihood.

Students should know about the options for livelihood available to them in their region, about the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to sustain those livelihoods, and about the place of such work in the regional, national, and international economies. (11)

Haas and Nachtigal argue that making a living in rural areas has become increasingly difficult and that many people would like to live in the safe haven of a small community, but believe they could never make enough income to support their families. They write, “Over the last century, rural America’s population has dissipated as people have hastened to find jobs in urban factories...we need to help rural citizens—students and adults—understand the implications of giant global corporations in the post-industrial age” (13). As educators, we do need to teach economic sustainability, but we must do so wisely. LeGrange cautions that “education for sustainability holds the danger of becoming education for consumerism and unbridled economic growth” (774).

Owens cites Paul Hawken who believes,

‘The ultimate purpose of business is not, or should not be to make money.’ What business must do is ‘create an enduring society...a system of commerce and production where each and every act is inherently sustainable and restorative to create a sustainable method of commerce.

Businesses will need to integrate economic, biologic and human systems.’(89)

Haas and Nachtigal believe “entrepreneurship education is vital to the survival of rural communities and can be offered as a community service to all citizens” (16). Tilley and Young advocate for a sustainability entrepreneur “who holistically integrates the goals of economic, social and environmental entrepreneurship into an organization that is sustainable in its goal and sustainable in its form of wealth generation” (88). Tilley and Young cite Kenneth Lux who advocates “the replacement of the profit motive by a concern for the common good” (90). Lux believes sustainability entrepreneurs “would largely eliminate the economy of unending growth and consumerism and be replaced by, for example, environmental restoration and preservation, holistic science, social upliftment and solidarity and the pursuit of beauty and truth” (90).

Entrepreneurship has always been one of the qualities evident in Aurora’s economic growth. We have many small business owners who have maintained a concern for the common good of this community. Aurora citizens associated with the Aurora Area Chamber and Development Corps have often supported entrepreneurial endeavors because they care about the economic sustainability of their community. In 2011 the local paper, the *Aurora News Register*, began a series of articles disseminating and evaluating

data from the 2010 Nebraska Public Power District's (NPPD) Economic and Demographic Trends Report. Kurt Johnson, publisher of the *News Register*, emphasized in his first column that the report "offers some must-read information for non-farm wage and salary employment by major economic sectors, as well as per capita personal income comparisons of area counties" ("What" A1). One of the biggest eye openers of the report was that "non-farm employment grew by 16.6 percent in Hamilton County in the last decade" (Johnson, "Economic" A1). This growth in non-farm employment is vital to the economic well being of rural citizens in a landscape that has changed over the past fifty years. Brooke notes,

For many students in the rural Great Plains, their family's livelihood is through family farms, but the stark reality is that farming is an occupation under siege in midwestern America and cannot sustain most of these young people. If they are to make a living, they will need training and experience that helps them understand other options, especially entrepreneurship. They will need to understand how businesses are formed and sustained, how to identify skills and resources they can offer personally, and how to locate markets they can tap. (11)

Aurora has tried to stay ahead of this demographic trend. In Vince Kuppig's *Daily Nebraskan* article, he cites Gary Warren, president of Hamilton Service Corporation, "Aurora differs from other rural Nebraska communities because of a realization by community leaders 40-50 years earlier... We figured out early on that we could not just depend on the agriculture community by itself... we have very strong agriculture here, but we need to diversify" (1).

Documenting the Dominant Work of a Community

The data offered in the NPPD report mirrors some of the findings English 12 students compiled in 2009 through work ethnographies where students explored their own work histories as well as their parents and grandparents. What they learned from a year of studying work histories was that even though there has been a trend away from agriculture, they found many jobs were rooted in a specific place, and that many of them received their Midwestern work ethic and concepts of citizenship from their ancestors. In understanding this work ethic these non-metropolitan students had a clearer understanding of their local community and cultural heritages and they were able to critique the work places in their locale. Through a place conscious project focusing on the work that has been sustaining our local economy for several generations we were able to comprehend how to lessen the effects of ‘temporary contracts’. Kilborn cites Ellen Dunham-Jones, head of the department of architecture at Georgia Tech, concerning the effects of temporary contracts:

Temporary contracts—of all kinds—are based on consuming rather than sustaining relationships...The lack of constraining relationships affords tremendous individual freedom—but at a cost. A world of temporary contracts inhibits sustained belonging of any kind, inhibits bonding to either people or place...The exchange of long-term relationships for short-term transactions has left us a crowd of perpetual strangers who often fail to recognize the value of shared needs and aspirations. (8)

The class of 2009 explored their own work histories as they asked themselves the question, “What is the dominant work of our community?” Students began this project,

“Hamilton County Farmer Digital Stories” by writing their own histories and progressing to their parents’ and grandparents’ before they were sent out to interview local farmers, often their own family members. I had established the farmer digital story project two years previously, but I wasn’t completely satisfied with the outcomes; the stories were good, but centered mostly on celebrating and preserving farmer’s nostalgic stories. Because I wanted my students to contextualize the purpose of the farmer stories and critique their place, they began to explore three generations of work histories. When all of the work histories were compiled, my students began to investigate the predominant work of the community and questions concerning the way work affects our community.

Wendell Berry writes in “Going to Work,” that “to live, we must go to work. To work, we must work in a place. Work affects everything in the place where it is done: the nature of the place itself and what is naturally there, the local ecosystem, and watershed, the local landscape and its productivity, the local human neighborhood, the local memory” (33). He said that most modern work is done in ‘enclosures’ which keep us from knowing how our work effects our place, but the work we do does have a “precise and practical influence, first on the place where it is being done, and then on every place where its products are used, on every place where its attitude toward its products is felt, on every place to which its by-products are carried” (33).

In their research, my students tried to discover something about the problem of effect and influence. Berry writes, “The responsibility of the worker is to confront the problems and deal justly with them, [and] it is possible only if the worker knows and accepts the reality of the context of work... Work must ‘take place.’ It takes place in a neighborhood and in a commonwealth” (33-34). To understand effect and influence and

to contextualize their own work, students asked themselves two questions: 1) Who are they? and 2) Where are they? They needed to remember who they were and what they had learned in and out of school and their own skills; they must also know the geological and human time of this place, its *genius* and its capacity to sustain them now and well into the future. Before they began to critique the affect and influence of work in this locale, they compiled a list of the jobs from their own, their parents', and their grandparents' work histories.

Over a span of fifty years, students noticed a shift in where the work took place. Most of the grandparents described their jobs as ones that probably took place in our community, either self-employed or employed by a business in Aurora. Often they were vocations like farmer or home builder (not a construction worker), homemaker, teacher, or bee keeper. Many of the students' grandparents also owned a business or a farm. The locale had to provide a market for less mobile people. Citizens could get just about anything they needed within a small community fifty years ago. (See Figure 3.1)

| Agriculture | Retail/Service | Factory Construction | Professional |
|--|--|---|--|
| Rancher, farmer, green house owner, ranch land owner, John Deere dealership, bee keeper, center pivot repairman, dairy farming, well man Co-o worker, Co-op manager, and irrigation. | hardware store, restaurant owner, jewelry store clerk, bowling alley owner, gas station owner, wood maker (carver), appliance sales, ceramic shop owner, sales and services, florist, banker, bar owner, FFA Leadership Center, assisted living, city electrician, church secretary, church work, baker, homemaker, nursing home, bartender, apartment manager, logger, cook, truck driver, nurse, county road maintenance, fire man, bookkeeper, activities director of nursing home, occupational therapist, air port service, garage company owner, swimming pool manager, chief of police, housekeeper, and auto technician. | Home builder, grain builder, roofer, car restorer, repair, electric motor shop, and electrician | Semi-pro race car driver, military (Navy, Army, Marines, Air Force) teacher, librarian, and minister |

Figure 3.1 Grandparent Work Histories

In their parents' generation, the baby boomers, there is a marked increase in mobility. Many jobs could still be viewed as vocations, and many jobs may have been in our community, but it is these work histories that we see the mention of many businesses or manufacturing plants in Grand Island, a community 23 miles northwest of Aurora. There were 24 jobs recognized by the name of the company, including Bosselman's, Swift, Excel, and Chief Automotive. We also noted that many of the manufacturing jobs were related to agriculture, including John Deere dealership, New Holland (manufacturers of agriculture equipment), and Excel and Swift (meat processing plants). (See Figure 3.2)

| Agriculture | Retail/Service | Factory Construction | Professional |
|---|---|--|---|
| Co-op, seed salesman, dairy farming, pig farming, farming, thistle picker, well man, seed company, ethanol production, John Deere company, New Holland, MFS, Swift, Chief Industries, Excel, CF Industries, Case International Harvester, Hooker Brothers | Lincare, A1 Fiberglass, Iams pet foods, florist, car sales, auto body work, telemarketing, tire salesperson, Starbuck's regional manager, coffee shop owner, grocery store management, gas station attendant/manager, butcher, daycare, receptionist, medical receptionist, mother, anesthesia tech, police officer, fire chief, Bosselman's, Hamilton relay services, Chief Automotive, custodian, truck driver, FFA Leadership Center, welding, plasma cutter, gunsmith, Red Cross, insurance salesperson, restaurant work, dental hygienist, mechanic, paper route, fire man, office manager, para-educator, grocery store worker, waste management, truck driver, race track worker, restaurant manager, convenience store clerk, dental assistant, cemetery caretaker, director of emergency management, CNA, hospital housekeeping, waitress, bartender | Top flite, electrician, CAD expert, Overhead Door, Larsen, Olsson Associates, grain bin builder, and brick layer | Nursing, military (Air Force, Army, Marines) pharmacist, teacher, endowment coordinator, lawyer, and financial advisor. |

Figure 3.2 Parent Work Histories

Much of the work in all three generations was related to the service or retail industries, but none more so than students' work histories. Of course, at their age, those are the only jobs available. (See Figure 3.3)

| Agriculture | Retail and Recreation |
|--|--|
| irrigation, farming, green house, detasseling, rogueing, well drilling wells | Subway, Arbys, Kohl's, bowling alley, tree service, the FFA Leadership Center, McDonald's, construction, nursing home work, pharmacy, air port, grocery clerk, restaurant, paper route, plumbing, swimming pool, lawn care service, babysitting, coffee shop worker, waitressing, housekeeping, flooring, floral, telemarketing, movie theater, corn maze, youth center worker, and Tak Waendo |

Figure 3.3 Student Work Histories

Their work histories showed very little professional career opportunities in Aurora or the neighboring community of Grand Island where many students commuted to their part-time jobs. The lack of professional careers may also be influenced by the demographics of my classes; the work ethnographies were not conducted in my advanced composition classes where parents may have had these types of jobs. My students discovered that if they do go to one of our larger communities to pursue a post-secondary education which might result in a professional career, they will have few opportunities to return to work in central Nebraska. For many students who may stay or insist on returning, there will be a commute. The NPPD study revealed that “54.4 percent of Aurora residents work outside the city. The most popular destination is Grand Island, which attracts 17.9 percent of the Aurora work force” (Johnson, “Economic” A8). The entire county’s outflow migration percentage was a bit higher at 66.6 percent. The flip side to this trend is that “Hamilton County has 43 percent of its work force driving into the county for work” (A8).

In order to understand more about the dominant work of this rural community, I asked students to write based upon writing prompts from David Seitz’s *Who Can Afford*

Critical Consciousness?: Practicing A Pedagogy Of Humility. Seitz asked his college students to consider who had been good and bad role models for teaching about work, compile a list of jobs they had had and which ones they liked or disliked, and write about personal relationships with bosses, co-workers and customers. Seitz also asked his students to list objects or tools they had to work with and to think about what careers they were contemplating. Finally, he asked his students to choose a positive or negative experience in which school experiences were or were not like work. These questions elicited extended essays from all of my students, on an academic continuum from the special education student to honor society member. Students wrote the most in depth about work role models and their jobs.

In *Rural Voices: Place Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing*, editor Robert Brooke states, “Writing ought to be a means of becoming a more active participant in our experience, a means of understanding, influencing, even shaping the communities in which we live” (ix). My interest in the local stories of the dominant work of our community members is a means to understand how to live well economically because ethnographies explore how citizens can make a living. Like Gruenewald, I have seen how education has shifted from the local to the global and how that shift has been detrimental to our local communities and local economies. As a teacher of English who advocates for authentic writing and inquiry, work histories and personal narratives of local community members and the work they do involves students in meaningful ways in the life of our community. In the era of high stakes testing, these work histories are an example of curriculum that meets several standards without a statewide test. Students learn several skills in this endeavor: vocabulary, writing, personal communication,

software application, and critical thinking. The outcomes of learning these skills are displayed in their final product, a digital story.

Two students exemplify why this form of inquiry works well in the English or writing classroom. Whitney and Jake wrote extensively about their role models and the vital influence their role models had upon them. Whitney, who later interviewed her uncle for the farmer digital story, wrote mostly about her dad, Jonathan:

My role models for work have been my parents, my grandpa, and my uncle. My parents managed a 200 acre farm, and took care of it extremely well. They worked long hours mowing, weeding, and feeding animals. My dad has had many jobs...he always wanted change, and to try something new. He went to many years of college, and after college he was a pastor. Then he went to law school and became a lawyer. He worked as a lawyer in a prestigious law firm in Washington D.C. He then went on to work at several other law firms, while managing a farm. He then opened his own coffee shop while still doing all those other things. When we moved to Nebraska, he was a lawyer and the manager of several different Starbucks. Recently, he began working as a financial advisor.

Jake, who later interviewed his grandpa, Walt, for the farmer digital story wrote:

The biggest role model for me in work would be my Grandpa. He has been my boss for the past few summers and I work for him on our farm. I look at him as a role model because he is such a hard worker and he always has something to do. His attitude towards work is positive and he is always accomplishing something and starting on something new. He is

very disciplined and gets done one project before starting another. His attitude towards work has helped to make me a better worker.

Both Jake and Whitney selected role models that exemplify one of the discoveries we made over the course of our project: we come from hard-working stock. The work ethic of Midwesterners is highly valued, as Kilborn noted in *Next Stop, Reloville*. Large corporations do hire from Great Plains universities for a reason: we work tirelessly and take pride in our ability to do so. Whitney's dad and Jake's grandpa both liked 'starting something new' but one was mobile and the other stayed put. Despite his mobility, Whitney's dad returned to his roots after the death of his wife in a farm accident, raising his large family surrounded by his extended family.

Whitney, like her father, had several jobs in her work history, including farm and yard work, fast food service, and nursing home employee. Her favorite job was farming and her least favorite, fast food. Jake, on the other hand, had never left the vicinity and had only two jobs in his life both associated with agriculture—working in close contact with his grandfather on their family farm and for a local seed company where he went through corn fields with a bean hook cutting down rogue corn. Jake loved working alongside his grandfather since he was 8 or 9 years old, learning a host of new things about farming through an intimate relationship with his grandfather.

What struck me about Whitney and Jake's work histories were the similarities between their work in a certain place. Whitney preferred working on their farm over any other job. Jake's work history conveyed this same sense of satisfaction with the farm. Both students alluded to the ability to become independent with "new responsibilities" or "exploring" connected with a place. Both received their work ethic because of direct

contact with their role models within the context of a place, a living, breathing space that was not 'enclosed.' Did either of these students have any idea of the influence of their work on their places, i.e. the farms? More importantly, the land? Did they have any concept of where its products were used? They may not have the full scope of this influence at their young ages, but I think they did know what affect farming has on the economy of a place and what the future might hold for their continuing work histories.

When asked to interview their parents and grandparents, students found it most difficult to interview their grandparents because of time and distance. Some students did not complete this aspect of the assignment giving various reasons for the lack of completion. One of the most poignant work histories throughout the process was shared by Jessica who told the story of the difficulty her grandfather, Larry, faced at a very early age:

My grandpa was one out of six kids. His mother left when his younger brother was two. So after that, my grandpa took on a lot of responsibility. He got his first job when he was eleven by local farmers asking for help. He received five cents per hour on a milk farm. At the age of fifteen he made one dollar per hour. He saved his money to get parts to build his own car. When he was eighteen, he wanted to get married and to farm his own farm. He ended up doing both.

It was really not too hard to make it where he is now. Money was short most of the time. He did not need schooling for the jobs he has done. He farmed and also had jobs in the hog business; it was something different each day, but he did not get along with everyone he worked for and with.

Especially the bosses that would cheat him out of money or out of benefits that they promised or the ones that put him in constant danger. But he learned from them and when he became the boss, he made sure that the jobs his workers did were jobs that he would do and jobs that would not put them in danger. Most of his changes in his jobs were because of sell outs. He had twelve jobs from the age of fifteen to fifty-five. In 2001 at age of 48 he went to college for heating and air. But at the age of fifty-five he is still continuing his work history.

Jessica's grandpa represents several discoveries my students learned through this process about the differences in their work and the work of their parents and grandparents. Most students agreed that both had fewer job opportunities than they now have. Many were surprised that their grandparents had a 'need' to work (rather than a 'want') because of economic hard times. Most grandparents began work at very young ages because of this, and consequently, some of them didn't have a high school education. Some students noted that college wasn't as important to their parents' generation as it was for theirs. All students recognized the difference in wages with a sense of incredulity. Students noted that parents and grandparents had served in the armed forces through a draft. Some of their parents (but very few grandparents) had the hardship of single parenthood. Most students recognized that there were many job opportunities in Aurora and Hamilton County, but there were a few who realized that beyond working in fast food establishments, there weren't a lot of jobs for teenagers, and that realization made them understand the value of an education. Most of the students commented that they had already had several jobs and worked many hours. Derek Owens

made this observation in *Composition and Sustainability*. He writes, “Americans now work more hours than ever before” and “seven million Americans now work at two or more jobs” (79, 80). He notes in his college classes that his “students are working more than ever before—coming to class, before and after their part-and full-time jobs, weary and distracted...[his] students work at least twenty hours a week, and have done so throughout the bulk of their undergraduate years” (91, 105).

The Value of Studying Work

Investigating the work histories of their own lives in addition to the work histories of their parents and grandparents helped my students contextualize the writing they would do before they ever began the process of interviewing local farmers. Students understood that what they were interested in knowing was what did farming entail in regards to actual work. Like many of their parents’ and grandparents’ stories, the farmer stories were filled with the difficulty of the work they do, especially the unpredictable weather and prices for crops. When they approached the questions they would ask farmers, they thought in terms of what actual jobs farmers performed.

Jake was completely immersed in agriculture throughout his life, but that didn’t mean he knew everything about his grandfather. In his initial reflection about the project, he wrote, “I learned a few things about my grandpa that I didn’t know. There were some really hard times in the 80’s and it takes quite a few years to get ahead in farming. Being a farmer is no easy task. There are long days and lots of work to do.” More than any other student, Jake learned about the cultural phenomenon of Midwestern work ethic through writing the farmer narrative about his grandfather, Walt. Jake has a stake in Hamilton County. He is one of the fortunate ones who may stay in a place; he is aware of how his

work influences a place or the people who use the products of farming, but he also definitely knows he will have real work to do, what Derek Owens calls “forms of hard labor with obvious rejuvenating benefits, especially labor that brings one in contact with the earth (Hasselstrom)” (78). Jake’s narrative depicts this sense of hard labor in association with the earth:

Walt was born in the same exact house that he lives in today. He has made some renovations to the house but he has lived and worked on the same farm all his life. If he would have had the chance, he would have liked to move to do something else, but he doesn’t know what he would have done for a job.

When his dad died, Walt took over the farm and it was his job to take over what his dad had started. He didn’t have the choice to do something else because the farm had to keep going. He was 18 years old when this responsibility was given to him. He has enjoyed farming throughout his life because it was all that he had ever done. He doesn’t really like it anymore because of his age. He is ready to retire and has started slowing down on what he all does on the farm. He has had the responsibility of running the farm for 55 years.

When he has work to do during the summer, he gets up at 5:30 or 6 in the morning to go out to the field. He works all day long doing many different things and doesn’t quit until 8:30 or 9 at night (daylight to dark). Planting is the most stressful part of the year. You have to get the crops in the ground or you won’t have anything to grow and that is the most

important thing he said. Picking the corn is another stressful part of the farming year and the weather doesn't always agree with when corn needs to be picked.

Today, he feels that it is necessary for a person to have a college education and know how to work with computers and keep up with the changing technology. It was real tough to start out farming. Back when he started he was real close to being bankrupt several of the years. They had their first irrigation well drilled in 1948 and it was the sixth irrigation well to be drilled in Hamilton County. There were up years and down years. It's taken him 52 years to get ahead. In 1980 and 1981 was the toughest time that they went through. It was a financial problem and the prices that were hurting them. He would go out on the truck all over the country to make money to keep the farm going, and my dad and grandma had to do all the chores on the farm while my grandpa was gone. The farm has been in the family for 103 years and it has changed from when it started.

Walt's story typifies the agricultural trend in Hamilton County of newer technologies which means less farms and the need for other jobs. The community leaders in Aurora recognized this trend over the past forty years. "With the farm community as sophisticated as it is we know it is going to require fewer people to farm more land so if we want to keep the community growing we're going to have to find more jobs for people in town" (Warren qtd. in Johnson, "Long-term" A6). The NPPD study noted that for Hamilton County, the "16.8 percent of non-farm employment is in manufacturing...[and its] location along the interstate has been prime for the

manufacturing and transportation industries” (Johnson, “Aurora” A10). As my students’ parent work histories showed, there was a shift of commuting to manufacturing jobs in nearby Grand Island. In the last decade, Aurora has recruited manufacturers to our community. Part of the reason may be the high percentage of ‘retail leakage’. Often, people commuting to other communities for work, “shop in their location of employment before heading home” (Johnson, “Economic” A8). According to Jenny Overhue of NPPD, residents of Hamilton County report “greater income levels than the average non-metropolitan county...the trick is getting them to spend it within Hamilton County instead of other areas” (A8).

Aurora residents do have the money to spend. Median family income is the midpoint in the ranked distribution of the sum of income for all family members 15 years of age and older. The median income for Hamilton County in 2009 was \$58,900 but it was \$3,100 below the state average and \$14,600 lower than metropolitan Nebraska (Overhue 29). It is difficult to attract Aurora graduates back to the community after completing their post-secondary educations, because young people tend to go where the best paying jobs are. Most colleges in Nebraska and across the country prepare their graduates for careers most predominant in the current job market. Many of the jobs in metropolitan areas they might seek will be in sectors not associated with agriculture including leisure, hospitality, financial services, natural resources and construction (Johnson, “Aurora” A10).

These types of jobs are limited in Hamilton County where farming remains the backbone of our community. Jim Koepke, board director of the Heritage Group, said the community was build upon agriculture and some of Hamilton County charitable

foundations were initially bequests from agricultural land sale. Koepke spoke of the late Ken Wortman who was dubbed “Mr. Aurora” because of his commitment to the city. Wortman was pleased with its economic development and new jobs but always reminded his fellow community leaders, “Let’s not forget about agriculture.” Koepke stated that more people are involved in agriculture in this county than any other job. He also acknowledged that irrigation and jobs and companies associated with it (well drilling and center pivot) were first and foremost because irrigation allowed farmers to excel in production.

Even though farming is predominant in Aurora, many students do not know much about the actual process of farming, the technology, or the amount of dedication, perseverance, and finances needed to succeed. Most students wouldn’t know the difference between a combine and a planter. Students often do not see the connection between their part time jobs and the farmers whose livelihood supports their employers. Through writing work ethnographies, students were given an opportunity to see that they are part of the larger community in more than just an economic way. They could see ecological, psychological, and intellectual connections too. Even if students do not return to Aurora, I want them to take with them wherever they go what they have learned about their community through making a connection with the men and women who farm the land, because it is the dominant work of our locale. I wanted them to be aware that “we are as influenced by the places we inhabit and our connections with the other organisms that share those sites as we are influenced by human relationships. Certainly, we are all influenced differently, but we are the products of our connections with an array of locations and the inhabitants thereof” (Weisser and Dobrin 86).

In 2010, my students investigated another sector of work through conducting interviews of small business owners. Through that process they too learned that every sector of the work force cares deeply about the economic sustainability of this place. Through inquiry into the work in Hamilton County, my students came to understand how important it is to be concerned about the sustainability of their future places, whether it is rural, suburban, or urban. As educators, we “have a responsibility to invent a locally based, pedagogical ethic informed and inspired by an awareness of the need to think and act sustainably” (Weisser and Dobrin 27).

Current statistics show that many of my students will migrate to urban and suburban areas in the eastern part of our state. The population of rural Nebraska will continue to decrease in this way. “Because the senior and near senior population is relatively large, we can expect to see substantial rural population losses resulting from death. In some localities this will no doubt exceed the birth rate. Thus, depopulation is likely to be a continuing theme in many non-metropolitan counties and communities” (Cantrell 4). Not only will the population decrease, but the livelihood of those retirees who stay will be affected, “leaving relatively few working age people to provide services to a relatively large number of retirees” (Carlson, et al 1). However, retirees in Aurora should rest assured that their livelihood has been preserved by forward thinking individuals. Koepke’s insight into the success of the community is evident. “We invest about \$150,000 into each student. Our kids need to return to the community, but we need to create opportunities that allow them to come back—we need the engineers, lawyers and physicians but we also need plumbers and electricians. We need to remind them: Don’t forget about Aurora.”

And there are many good reasons why Aurora High School graduates should consider returning to their roots. Koepke spent many years telling Aurora's story far and wide across the state to economic development groups, college students, and anyone who wanted to know about how to give back to their communities because that is the heart of Aurora, Nebraska. Koepke promoted this philosophy of our community along with fellow citizens Wortman and Warren. It is about the generosity of citizens who through private foundations provided the funding for construction of several buildings that serve the community: The Alice Farr Library, The Bremer Community Center, The Plainsman Museum, The Edgerton Center, Frank M. Farr Senior Center, and most recently, the Aurora Day Care Center. Koepke also noted that Memorial Hospital was built through private donations and most recently added a new surgery center and is currently undergoing renovation of its emergency room.

The most recent privately funded project in Aurora is a new four-plex consisting of three softball fields and one Legion-sized baseball field. Two citizens were instrumental in raising the \$1.6 million dollars through 4 Diamond Sports, a new non-profit organization. Doug Kittle, Aurora High School Principal, and Wayne Griffith, a local farmer, contributed time, money, and manpower to complete the complex. Jayne Mann, current owner of Wortman Motor Company and daughter of Ken, said, "Our town is very proactive in responding to needs...Sometimes you think it's impossible, but somehow this community gets it done" (Kupping 1).

In addition to facilities that serve the community, the Hamilton Community Foundation, with assets of \$11 million, also provided a quarter of a million dollars in college scholarships in 2011. Maggie Rasmussen, Aurora High School guidance

counselor, stated that since she began her tenure nine years ago, the scholarship award money has doubled. In 2004, there were “14 local private foundations...with combined assets of \$29 million” (Kupping 1). Syd Widga of Widga Financial Services and secretary-treasurer of the Hamilton Community Foundation said, in 2011, there were seventeen foundations with assets of nearly \$60 million.

Clearly, the citizens of Aurora are quite proud of these accomplishments and they are startling considering the population of the community and county. Aurora’s 2010 population was 4,479 and the entire county was 9,124. Aurora experienced a six percent increase in a decade and despite the population decline in most rural areas in the last decade, Aurora has increased its numbers and maintained its philosophy of serving the community through private benevolence.

Derek Owens admonishes, “Educators have a responsibility to prepare students for the work place...[and] an even greater responsibility to provide contexts where students might critique and reinvent the idea of work so that it is no longer a four-letter word but something spiritually fulfilling, supportive of more free time, environmentally defensible, and most importantly, sustainable” (78). I believe work ethnographies, or the study and observation of the types of livelihood in our community, enable all students, whether suburban, urban, or rural, to find ways to strengthen and sustain their own communities through the investigation of local work and the issues they may discover through that investigative lens. Stone writes, “Students can understand a community better by seeing it through the eyes of people who live and work there and will continue to care about it after the students have graduated and moved away” (38). In asking our students to go out into our community, I hope they will ‘own their places’ in ways that

connects them deeply to what it means to call a place, 'home,' because "...we cannot know where we are now unless we can remember where we have come from" (Gruchow 7).

Chapter 4

Living Well Politically—A Sense of Civic Involvement

As a nation we are becoming civically illiterate. Unless we find better ways to educate ourselves as citizens, we run the risk of drifting unwittingly into a new kind of Dark Age—a time when cadres of specialists will control knowledge and thus control the decision-making process—Woodrow Wilson, in *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America* by Benjamin Barber

Practicing a Politics of Place

The third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson “insisted that giving information to the people was the most certain engine of democracy: ‘Educate and inform the whole mass of people. Enable them to see that it is in their interests to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them...They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty’” (Sandel qtd. in Haas and Nachtigal 41). If we are to avoid the Dark Ages of a failed democracy, we must continue to educate our citizens. One of the most important aspects of that education is teaching our students how to become engaged citizens. One of the greatest privileges of American citizenship is a public education. As citizens of this democracy we have long supported public education because it “is vested in the trust that the return on our investments (time, concern, and taxes) to educate other people’s children transcends benefits to individuals” (Haas and Nachtigal 9). However, many Americans now fear that “their trust has been misplaced” and this has eroded support for public schools (9). The loss of this trust in public education comes at a high cost. David Mathews writes,

Any arrangement that makes our schools less public will have serious consequences—not only for our schools but for an entire country that was organized around the expectation that there would always be public education to ‘complete the great work of the American Revolution.’ (Haas and Nachtigal 9)

Since Haas and Nachtigal wrote *Place Value* in 1998, the U.S. has experienced tremendous growth in the charter school movement, or movement toward privatized schools. In 2010, the documentary film, *Waiting for “Superman”* was produced by Davis Guggenheim and Lesley Chilcott, the same people who produced *An Inconvenient Truth*. I first learned of it through an email from a former student. Patrick has lived in New York City since he graduated in 1998 and he was one of the first U.S. citizens to view the movie. His email letter profusely thanked all of his teachers for the great public education he received. As soon as the documentary was available, I watched it, and throughout the movie, my ire rose steadily, fueled by its propaganda. Katy Salwell, professor of education at George Mason University and Michael W. Apple, professor of education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, write:

Throughout the film, Guggenheim himself narrates, wryly explaining the web of local, state, federal, and union bureaucracy that intrudes on ‘good’ teaching and shocking the audience with a variety of statistics about abysmal national reading scores, the tenure policies of unions protecting bad teachers at the expense of children, and unfavorable comparisons with other countries (primarily Finland). Unfortunately, the typical viewer may not recognize the irresponsible way in which he presents such ‘facts.’ (372)

Swalwell and Apple point out the numerous inconsistencies within the film and the lack of facts about the success rate (or lack thereof) of charter schools. Although *Waiting for "Superman"* ignited a needed conversation about the state of public education, their final analysis of the film was admonitory:

Through its visual codes, its absent presences, its lack of respect for the hard work of teachers and its demonization of teachers unions as the ultimate source of our educational problems, and its failure to deal with the racial structures of this society and the structural sources of income inequality and the fundamentally flawed tax system in this nation, director Davis Guggenheim and producer Leslie Chilcott deliver our schools to some of the very same ideological and economic movements about which there are justifiable worries. (379)

Diane Ravitch, research professor of education at New York University and previous U.S. assistant secretary of education, also wrote concerning the film, “The stock market crash of 2008 should suffice to remind us that the managers of the private sector do not have a monopoly on success. Public education is one of the cornerstones of American democracy. The public schools must accept everyone who appears at their doors, no matter their race, language, economic status, or disability.”

To secure our public education and to live well politically, we need to ground our civic education in an immediate locale. Michael Sandel acknowledges, ““grounding political education in a particular place is crucial...self-government [must be] an activity rooted in a particular place, carried out by citizens *loyal* to that place and the way of life it embodies”” (7) [Emphasis mine]. Sandel believes that as citizens in a specific locale,

we have the civic resources we need and they are “‘still to be found in the place and stories, memories and meanings, incidents and identities that situate us in the world and give our lives moral particularity’” (8). Sandel notes that most American students learn about our federal government through a textbook but this doesn’t engage students in the act of citizenship. Haas and Nachtigal cite Benjamin Barber who notes that citizenship has lost its currency, and has “‘come to mean little more than voting’ and that ‘Democratic politics has become something we watch rather than something we do’” (10).

Haas and Nachtigal write, “Helping students identify, investigate, and act on municipal and county government issues teaches principles of citizenship more meaningfully than abstract discussion of the three branches of a distant government” (8). They advocate for a public education that requires students to participate locally where “teachers send students out to see for themselves how democracy works” and where the “school itself [is] a living laboratory of democratic principles...providing rehearsals in civic practice” (10). Paul Theobald recognizes that “political decision making is the privilege and responsibility of all, not just of those who successfully run for office” (9).

Considering the current political climate in the United States, it is vital we teach our students that the necessary civility for governing ourselves begins at home where we must “provide role models of integrity, care, and thoughtfulness in institutions whose actions embody their ideals [and] recognize that the process of education is as important as its content” (Orr qtd. in Stone 33). A sense of civic engagement is the most essential practice of social sustainability which “always involves a whole community” (Stone 37). Stone writes that we must preserve “endangered human cultures” just as we preserve our

ecosystems. He writes, “Social and economic equity and justice are important to sustainable societies in the same way that maintaining a dynamic balance among members of a natural ecosystem is important to its sustainability” (37). He encourages sustainable schooling where “teachers and administrators model, and students learn and practice, the skills required for cooperative decision making and action” (37).

Living well politically is the most important sense to instill in students but also quite difficult to implement because of the nature of our educational system. Yet, if we empower our students with the how-to and hands-on experience of self-government, we will preserve this democracy. Wasonga argues for deep democracy as defined by John Dewey. It is a place where “there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being just because it is a good shared by all” (202). She notes that deep democracy is both a process and a goal that thrives on “interdependence and the importance of collective choices [community] and actions [justice] in working for the common good...These practices lead to a ‘sustained process of open dialogue, right to voice, community inclusion, and responsible participation toward the common good’” (202) It demands “respect and reverence for individuals to participate, and recognizes interdependence, collective choices, and actions for student learning” (203).

Achieving deep democracy is no easy task. In any democratic process there will be conflicts and challenges because there will be power struggles and selfish interests and a fear of losing control. It takes a good deal of skill to work

effectively in collaboration but it is worth the effort because the “best democratic community presupposes there is greater efficacy” and it will require “open inquiry, communication, and collaboration, combined with sensitivity, respect, and absolute regard” (Wasonga 202, 203). Theobald cites the ancient Greek worldview as a model to emulate because it “looked out to the community in an effort to establish a kind of order or harmony. People looked at the community and its needs to find an individual ‘fit’—the communal role that an individual’s life might occupy” (9)

Local Issue Inquiries

In order for students to find an ‘individual fit’ in their community, educators need to provide the type of inquiry that leads to the deep democracy that first gives students an opportunity to “fit” into a *school* community, not just as receivers of knowledge but producers of knowledge. Patricia Davies, a doctoral student in educational policy and leadership at the University of Manchester, notes,

Knowledge and power are intrinsically intertwined. By serving as knowledge producers, students as researchers can challenge deep-rooted educational structures that promote power inequalities...providing students with the knowledge and skills to gather and present information about learning and what needs to change can become a vehicle through which they can assert their rights. (76).

Throughout my early teaching career, many of my students regularly wrote research papers on the most common controversial topics, so I was re-reading the same argumentative papers every year. My students were not engaged in authentic inquiry that

may have initiated civic action. I wanted them to become engaged in our own local issues and become aware that we had problems or concerns right in our own back yard that we should care about. In 2006, I devised a curriculum change in college composition courses that allowed students to formulate a local inquiry. Students wrote papers centered on a critical inquiry concerning a local issue, i.e. the school community, the community of Aurora, Hamilton County, or the state of Nebraska. Each student read his or her paper before classmates and was prepared to answer questions from the audience. In addition to defending his or her argument before classroom peers, students were also required to ask relevant questions during each other's symposiums.

Unlike Eliot Wigginton or any teacher in a Foxfire classroom, my students did not present their findings to a larger community audience. Considering the nature of some of the topics, especially within the community, I should have encouraged all students to present their arguments at city hall and some could have even gone before the Nebraska legislature, especially those students who wrote passionately about the death penalty. I have had a few students who have presented their symposium papers before the school board because I encouraged them to do so. One student, Katie, read her paper about forming a trap-shooting club within the school district which included an argument that even if they did not form a team, those students on a local private team should be allowed absences from school like other students involved in other extracurricular activities. Two young men have also gone before the school board on separate occasions to present their arguments for a school sponsored baseball team which could enhance their playing ability beyond the summers only Legion season.

Most students discovered there were plenty of topics to write about within their own school community or the community of Aurora or at the state level. The topics at the school level have included respect for educators, the lack of respect for the arts in the school, semester exam policies, appeals for new courses, appeals for new athletic teams, No Child Left Behind policies, and the influence of a state football championship upon the school and community. Topics at the community level have included the effects of shopping locally, the preservation of local cemeteries, the lack of preservation of historic buildings, the lack of recreational opportunities, the need for a new swimming pool, the care of the elderly, and the need for more restaurants. At the state level, students have written about the state patrol's Click it or Ticket program, drunk driving, the drinking age, smoking bans, and the death penalty.

What I hoped to achieve with this curriculum change was engaging students in authentic inquiry based upon the need to know their place and how they might elicit change or at least awareness among their fellow students, educators, and administrators. I wanted my students to write "what they know" from their personal investigation of a local issue rather than surf the Internet for a topic that any student anywhere in the country or the world could investigate and produce the same written response. I especially encouraged them to investigate their inquiries through personal interviews. Students interviewed many administrators, teachers, peers and parents concerning school issues. At the community level students interviewed the mayor, city council members, county commissioners, attorneys, police officers, bankers, physicians, city employees, and many business owners. At the state level students contacted and received responses from state legislators, U.S. senators and representatives, and the governor. I also

advocated for use of our local newspaper, other statewide news sources, our local museum and library. This opened the door for students to become more aware of their locale and that we do indeed have issues worthy of study. It also presented the possibility for future work which engages them in civic action.

Garrett was both a band member and football player and his argument was that athletics should not be perceived as better than the arts. In his paper, excerpted here, he cited two music education articles and our school activities budget report, conducted a student survey, and interviewed six classmates and the band director,

I have played football every year possible here at Aurora Public Schools, have participated in wrestling and track in the past, and continue to lift weights in the weight room. Also, I joined the band while in elementary school, and have participated in numerous small groups and honor bands. I have always felt a difference in how the two are viewed and treated.

Athletics receive more press, more fan turnout, and more resources than other activities. Those involved in athletics are generally more ‘popular’ than those who are not. I believe that the prevalent attitude in Aurora Public Schools is that athletic organizations are intrinsically more beneficial than artistic activities, and that they hold a more important position in the life of the student and community.

I, on the other hand, do not believe that any activity is better than the other. Each of us is different in that we have different goals, different interests, and different abilities. These differences are largely beyond our control, dependent on our genetics, our upbringing, and the individuality

that each mind possesses. Not all are born with the body of a linebacker, or the voice of a tenor, or the lips of a flutist. Each of us is suited to different activities, and when those abilities meet our interests, great things happen. The mindset that arts are secondary fallback for those who cannot succeed at sports is arrogant and insensitive, yet, I believe, very common.

Really, the attitude that athletics have more merit than arts not only hurts the individual, who might want to sing but is afraid of a judgmental glance from his peers, but the society as a whole, which might be losing talented musicians, actors, and artists who simply never realized their talents. We need to be free to use the gifts we have, and to explore our interests, without having to worry about someone else's idea of 'cool.' Sometimes, you have to be strong *not* to be a wrestler. Sometimes, it takes more courage to join the band than it does to join the football team.

Garrett chose a topic that is quite sensitive in our school because athletes are in the power position and often the entire community has a bias towards athletes. In a small rural community athletes are revered because they generate pride in the school and community as well as generate income because the majority of our citizens support various athletic events because they are fairly inexpensive entertainment on Friday nights. Most administrators, teachers and students maintain there isn't a bias towards athletes, but Garrett's insights were honest. Not surprisingly, many of his interviews with students were dubbed anonymous—athletes who were afraid of being judged for telling it like it is. He notes in a reflection,

In my research, I connected with many other students. Some valued one activity over (or at the expense of) the other, but some, it turned out, were just like me, facing exactly the same struggle. I liked finding this; it meant I wasn't alone.

Although Garrett did not engage in a school wide inquiry where he analyzed data and made recommendations to our school board about school improvement, he did recognize that his local inquiry was an important step for him personally. He certainly showed social and cultural awareness of his small town and the ongoing tension between the two social groups. He displayed a healthy amount of tolerance because he was both an athlete and a “nerd.” He acknowledged that although our school is not culturally diverse, it certainly has students who are talented in different ways. He also learned something tangible about the research and interview process—some interviewees were quite reluctant about being named. Garrett learned that he had to respect the wishes of his peers who feared retribution. Garrett also had an opportunity to display his intellectual growth within the classroom as he presented his argument to his classmates and showed much poise as he addressed their questions (and often ire). As a place conscious educator, I was also pleased that he began to understand the importance of living well in his current place through investigating it. He continued in his reflection:

Inquiry should begin locally if possible...inquiry should be local so that it's kept small enough to grasp...Also, since we live locally, interacting with the same people and places regularly, sometimes a local focus is more important than a wide scope...I can't solve all of the world's problems, but I can help my neighbor. I can work to protect the local

creek. I am most effective at fixing the problems that are nearest me, geographically and socially.

While Garrett focused on a school issue, Kylee focused on a community issue that she was emotionally invested in, i.e. supporting the “Little Man” or local businesses. Her uncle owned an office supply store, Hometown Variety, where she also worked part-time. Kylee interviewed seven students who held part-time jobs at businesses as well as three business owners and a teacher who made it a point to shop locally.

The results of a survey given to Aurora students overwhelmingly show that there is a void in the things we can buy in town. After asking existing retailers about what kind of things we should add, they weren't as enthusiastic about the idea. They wanted to make sure it didn't overlap anything we already had.

On average, the Aurora high school students said in a survey that they go to Grand Island [a larger community twenty minutes away] once a week. Usually the trips increase during the summer, and decrease during the winter. They buy a variety of things, many of which were at Wal-mart or Conestoga Mall. Both retailers and students agree that they would like more clothing. Other types of retail mentioned were electronics and sporting goods.

In order for us to grow in population, we need more options for our community. With the many new housing projects here in town, we have to have ways to attract more people. More retail locations would be

beneficial to previous city dwellers, who are used to being able to get anything they need right away.

If we make more of our community's most requested items available, eventually Aurorans' weekly trips to Grand Island will decline. They really appreciate being able to stop in on a Sunday afternoon and grab ink for their children's last minute school project. It is vital for our citizens to keep this opinion. By doing this, we will help all the 'little men' who work so hard and support so much of our town. We will keep our business owner's biggest fears at bay.

Kylee's inquiry into adolescent shopping patterns is certainly useful data for small business owners in Aurora, noting that teens really wanted more clothing choices (trendy and cosmopolitan), electronics (mp3 players, video games, etc.) and sporting goods (both apparel and equipment). As a teacher I could have encouraged her to present her findings to the area chamber of commerce because she certainly had insight into the dilemma area businesses face—smaller inventories and higher prices. She was quick to analyze how to offset those difficulties by offering customer convenience as an asset. Certainly community and business development groups could partner with 9-12 students and parents in an inquiry that would benefit these businesses by conducting the research with the very clientele they hope to bring into their stores.

What struck me most about Kylee's inquiry is how astute she was about the importance of small businesses to the vitality of the entire community. She also showed insight into the potential for a demographic shift of former urban or suburban dwellers moving to a small town—though this is not the current trend, it showed she was aware

that some Aurora graduates may decide to return and they will want several buying options. She was also very realistic, knowing that starting a new business takes a great deal of time.

At the end of the semester, students write evaluations about their local inquiry projects. It astounds me when they often acknowledge how little they previously knew about their own community. Not unlike adolescents in any given city around the world, they are caught up in their social relationships and a whirlwind of activities. These excerpts highlight some of the key types of responses:

- It's been really helpful to have the opinions of others in my paper other than having a 'one man show.' Since I chose to write about something that I actually cared about, it was easier to gather my thoughts and write without getting stuck.
- This paper made me realize that there is actually something in the community that I have a strong opinion about. I know that might sound strange, but nowadays teenagers don't really have a care in the world when it comes to their communities. This paper really taught me to appreciate my community more and more each day.
- I really enjoyed getting public opinions for my essay. It was interesting to hear and let others know.
- I spent hours interviewing, collecting information, and on the telephone setting up appointments to get the information. I learned that there are so many resources out there and so many individuals from our town willing to give up their time to inform the youth (me) about

our town's future. It was amazing to me, to interact with these people and meet new faces.

Having my students conduct their own inquiries into issues in our local community helped them “make sense of their condition and interpret the common life they share; at its best [this] political deliberation is not only about competing policies but also about competing interpretations of the character of a community, its purpose and ends” (Sandel qtd. in Haas and Nachtigal 9). I wanted an honest investigation but more importantly, I wanted them to expand their knowledge of their surroundings and the people they interact with daily. I wanted them to learn that we must know our own local problems and consider what we must do to solve them. In short, I wanted them to become good citizens who have a critical eye about what should matter most: the place we call home.

Instilling a sense of civic involvement or living well politically is the greatest attribute of place conscious pedagogy. Woodhouse and Knapp agree that “one of the most compelling reasons to adopt place-based education is to provide students with the knowledge and experiences needed to actively participate in the democratic process” (4). Haas and Nachtigal write, “Public schools shoulder responsibility as public institutions to help young people claim their identities as inhabitants of a particular place” (10). All other aspects of living well branch out from this sense. If students have convictions about how to live well in community, spiritually, economically, and ecologically, they will certainly need to have their voices heard so that they can advocate for these convictions in a public way, ultimately securing the best kind of living for all in a place. My college composition classroom is merely the beginning for them because as a place conscious educator I must focus on “student engagement and community inquiry. Since place

conscious students are supposed to be learning how to participate fully in their local regions, students need classrooms where they have a say in the civic work of education” (Brooke 13). Robert Brooke writes,

Place conscious education is aimed at a specific kind of citizenry. Place conscious citizens should be people who can live well in intradependence—that is, people who know enough about their natural and cultural region to fashion lives that enhance the communities located there. Place conscious citizens are locally active, engaged in community decision making for their region through work, schools, local government and civic organizations. (13)

Policy Changing Possibilities

Josie Roberts and Rachel Bolstad argue the best form of civic participation focused on the premise that “young people, as the recipients/users/direct beneficiaries of schooling, have a right and a responsibility to be involved in decisions about their learning and schooling” (4). They cite a 2004 study by Flutter and Rudduck that the “strongest forms of youth participation involve students working in partnership with adults and having direct input into action, rather than carrying out investigations in isolation and making recommendations for others to merely consider” (4). Furthermore, participation involves students as co-researchers, where “pupils and teachers jointly initiate enquiry; pupils play an active role in decision-making; together with teachers they plan action in the light of data and review impact of the intervention” (4).

In one such study in Great Britain involving students as co-researchers studying information and communications technology (ICT), students collected and analyzed data

about ICT practices from teachers, students, and other international schools, developed school policy and then submitted their recommendations to the school management (Davies 71). This is the kind of authentic student participation we should advocate. Thomson and Gunter (2009) “contend that often the students who are consulted are those in agreement with, and who will not challenge, the current practices of the school” (71). However, Davies notes that often school district officials believe that students at all levels lack the maturity to conduct research alongside adults because “schools remain steeped in the ideology of immaturity, further undermining students’ rights as members of the school community” (Davies 72).

DeFur and Korinek’s research shows that “students have important insights and relevant suggestions that can make schools more effective” (15). They believe that both middle and high schools must create “structures in which all students have a voice and contribute to the governance and community of secondary education” (15). They noted that “students in dialogue increased their sense of self-worth, efficacy, and membership in the school” (15). Most importantly, DeFur and Korinek note the value of listening to every voice,

Listening to and dialoguing with all type of students—not just the high achievers or natural leaders—and encouraging them to voice their opinions promotes community, a sense of belonging, and increased student engagement. Students can help schools to identify issues, focus faculty on needed student supports, and bridge youth and adult worlds.

The positive effect of honoring student voices and involving them in more

integral, meaningful ways in their school experience cannot be ignored as we seek to improve schools and meet higher standards. (19)

My imagined future as a placed conscious educator is someone who advocates for a community wide investigation of a real issue in our school, for example, a 1:1 computer program initiative. In this investigation, all stakeholders of our district would be involved in the inquiry, researching side by side. I imagine teachers at every grade level in all curricular areas, administrators from elementary, middle and high schools, school support staff members, parents from all walks of life, business owners, city council members, members of civic organization like Rotary and Knights of Columbus, school board members and most importantly, students: elementary, middle school and high school. Each group could bring their diverse philosophies into the thinking and knowledge building. This type of democratic process is transparent. No one feels like they are in the “dark” about important decisions made about the nature of their children’s learning and how our district might invest precious district funds into technology purposes. The inquiry would allow all stakeholders to consider if this was the best use of tax payers’ dollars to enhance and improve student learning.

Although I have only an imagined future of a school-wide or community-wide investigation, there are teachers across the country whose students are politically engaged in changing school policies. Daniel Boster, a fellow Nebraska Writing Project teacher consultant and colleague who teaches at Ralston High School initiated a curriculum change in his school district in the fall of 2011. Boster and I participated in the 2011 Summer Literature Institute at UNL where the focus was Native American Literature and approaches to teaching this literature in Nebraska schools while addressing the history of

indigenous people. As a participant in the class, Boster was passionate about discovering ways to include more native writers into his curriculum. In the fall, he noted that in addition to the standard American literature pieces in their textbooks such as the explorer literature of Cabeza de Vaca and material on Plymouth Plantation, he also presented approximately 40 teacher-selected Native American novels to his junior level students to read independently, including Mary Crow Dog's *Lakota Woman*, Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed* and Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Boster also included excerpts from Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* which includes atrocities committed by early explorers of the new continent.

Boster explained that reading Zinn had a life-changing impact upon his students. They were angered about what they had been taught about Christopher Columbus and the first Thanksgiving. They asked the questions, "Why do we have Columbus Day? Why do we learn lies?" A mother of one of Boster's students was a second grade teacher, so his students emailed the girl's mother asking these questions and she responded. She encouraged the students to contact the curriculum director to inquire about changing the curriculum. Boster told the students that he could contact the curriculum director, so they could ask questions about how curriculum matters were decided. Boster has contemplated the possibility of pursuing school-funded teacher training that would enable a change in the district's curriculum and what he and his students might do to enact this sort of change. For Boster, the highlight was arranging for his high school students to teach new lessons to a sixth grade class on Columbus Day and near Thanksgiving. The lessons focused on early American literature with more accurate information about Native

American history and stories. The students contacted the teacher and explained that they had developed four lessons including games to teach the sixth graders. The students have also indicated they want to attend a school board meeting to effect a permanent change in the district's curriculum.

Boster said the most important outcome of teaching a place-based curriculum is that it “empowers students in their own place.” He also noted that many teachers don’t get it, this idea of connecting students to genuine civic engagement. “Many teachers feel that it takes more time. It’s not insurmountable. It took us a little bit of time to talk to other teachers and the curriculum director.” He acknowledged that yes, he had to make some arrangements outside of the classroom, but that the student learning and results were so much more rewarding. “It is a little work up front, but when you see the kids go to other classrooms and become teacher themselves, you get to see a miracle happen.”

Undoubtedly, Boster’s call to action could be replicated in almost every school district in America where standardized textbooks reign and the story of Columbus is repeated yearly. Students in Aurora could also investigate the school district’s curriculum and initiate a similar change. Each community, however, has its own set of issues for local inquiry. Rather than keeping my students’ inquiries solely in the classroom, I should strive for the critical place conscious pedagogy Gruenewald advocates. Kylee’s symposium about supporting local businesses could have become an opportunity for my students to act. Students could have investigated the demographic trends of Hamilton County and studied the NPPD report to understand more about the “retail leakage” problem in our community. Students could have conducted public forums to encourage support of small businesses or devised a marketing campaign to emphasize buying local.

I also could have required students to attend chamber of commerce and city council meetings to understand the dynamics of economics and civic engagement. I also could have helped students conceptualize a small business of their own so they could study the effects of buying locally and the adversity faced by many small business owners. Gregory A. Smith writes in “Place-Based Education: Breaking Through the Constraining Regularities of Public Schools”:

Students given the opportunity to analyze economic trends or to create their own businesses begin to see how economic well-being can derive from individual initiative as well as the actions of transnational corporations. And those who learn to investigate issues and present testimony at public hearings come to understand how their own voices can potentially influence policy and decision-making. (192)

We cannot maintain a democracy unless we give young people a chance to become engaged citizens through practicing civic responsibility, because “reinvigorating public life and living well politically require articulating the problem, inventing solutions, and finding others who will join you. Education in a democracy should create opportunities for young people to rehearse these steps” (Haas and Nachtigal 11).

Chapter 5

Living Well Ecologically: A Sense of Place

The crisis of sustainability, the fit between humanity and its habitat, is manifest in varying ways and degrees everywhere on earth. It is not only a feature on the public agenda; for all practical purposes it is the agenda...Sustainability is about the terms and conditions of human survival, and yet we still educate at all levels as if no such crisis existed.

--David Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*.

Defining Ecological Sustainability

I began to more fully grasp the concept of sustainability when my hometown, Silver Creek, Nebraska lost its public school. Silver Creek High School produced its last year book in 2001. I would no longer see School District No. 6 on the side of a school bus. The district consolidated with two others within a 25 mile radius. At the time, my oldest brother, Michael Cave, was on the Silver Creek school board and his children were in middle school and elementary school. He believed the consolidation was a good idea because his children would have a lot more curricular and extracurricular opportunities. To him, it was the best means to sustain an education for his children. Within five years the new school district administration made plans to have the 1910 building that housed grades 5-12 razed. I'll never forget the day I drove into town and gasped at seeing an empty lot with a wooden sign painted in purple and silver—Twin River Schools. My brother is no longer on the school board and acknowledges that community members worry the village will also lose its K-4 building, and even though his children are now

grown he is still concerned for other parents with small children who may have to ride a bus for a twenty mile round trip.

Ironically, a study completed four years prior to the consolidation of the three schools at Silver Creek, Genoa, and Monroe indicated “sustainability is a construct theoretically applicable to small schools” (Howley and Hobart 22). The study implied that the century-long trend of consolidation or the “massification” of public education “based upon the imputed value of efficiency, has endangered not only small schools, but public schooling itself” (23). Howley and Hobart’s study cited a further irony: the trend of praise for small schools especially in an *urban* setting. They note that “small schools are a *reform concept*, and proponents in cities ask one another if they are ‘doing small schools’” (23). The authors argue that small schools within an urban and rural context are critical to sustaining public education, because they have the “potential to capture such commitments as conservation, stewardship, and long-term vitality” (23).

Growing up in town with a population of 480 in rural Nebraska provided me with several ecological advantages. I grew up close to the land and understood the seasonal growing cycle. I knew where my food came from. We had a large garden and we were expected to help maintain and harvest it. I spent a good deal of time with my maternal grandmother who lived across a road and a cornfield west of our house. She planted and maintained two large gardens and several fruit trees. This meant a lot of canning in the sweltering heat of late July and all of August in homes without air conditioning. My grandmother and aunt also raised chickens—broilers they were called, so I knew the fried chicken on my plate on Sunday came after much work—feeding, housing, and exercising the birds—and then butchering, boiling water, plucking feathers, and “dressing” the birds

for the deep freezer. Silver Creek is also surrounded by water, hence the name of the consolidated school: Twin River, the rivers being the Platte to the south and the Loup to the north. My father's greatest loves (besides us) were fishing and hunting, but fishing, by far, took precedence. It was a good thing, too. During the summer months, we lived off his fresh water catches, catfish and bass, mostly, and if the Platte was really low, we had an ample supply of carp, because my brothers were pretty adept at spearing for them with pitch forks. Of course, we were also surrounded by acres and acres of corn and many farmers back then also raised livestock, mostly cattle and pigs.

Imagine my shock when in 1973 at age thirteen I watched the movie, *Solyent Green*, set in the future when all vegetation is non-existent. The character Roth, played by Edward G. Robinson, discovers the source of solyent green: people. Roth is near death and chooses to be euthanized and is allowed to watch a video on large screens with photographs of plants, animals, and beautiful landscapes while classical music played. Most of the newest citizens didn't even know vegetation existed, but Roth remembered. Roth asks police detective Thorn to follow his body after this process to uncover the truth and spread the word about solyent green. Needless to say, I had a very difficult time wrapping my adolescent mind around this possibility because of my experience. Surely we would forever be able to grow plants and feed animals on this planet! The futuristic date of that movie was 2022, only eleven years from now. *Solyent Green* in all regards was not a movie classic, but the B movie certainly left a lasting environmental disaster impression upon me. It planted a seed of concern for the planet and how its inhabitants would ensure its survival.

Sustainability is the core of living well ecologically. As Robert Brooke states, “part of living well involves developing a sustainable relationship with the natural world in which one’s community is located. Understanding the biology of one’s region, how that biology connects to local industry and agriculture, and the consequent biological issues that impact one’s community is thus a fundamental aspect of the ability to live well” (10). Michael Stone agrees that “when people get to know a particular place well, they begin to care about what happens to the landscape, creatures, and people in it. When they understand its ecology, the web of relations it supports, and the rhythm of its cycles, they develop an appreciation for and sense of kinship with their surroundings” (38).

Haas and Nachtigal cite David Orr’s *Ecological Literacy* that notes we must teach students how “to become inhabitants, not residents of their place [and] the study of place has a significance in reeducating people in the art of living well where they are. The distinction between inhabiting and residing is important here” (3). According to Orr inhabitants of a place ‘dwell’ in “an intimate, organic and mutually nurturing relationship with a place” (3). Orr maintains that ‘dwellers’ know their place like the back of their hands: carefully observed, cared for, and deeply rooted. These kinds of inhabitants make the best kind of citizens, honest folk who are “the bedrock of the stable community and neighborhood” (3).

I write about this sense last because even though it is the first sense Haas and Nachtigal refer to in a successful place-conscious pedagogy, it has been the most difficult to instill in a predominantly agriculture-centered community. It has been difficult despite the fact that Vitek and Jackson argue that “working agricultural and rural landscapes provide insight into types of communities, practices, virtues, and values that facilitate the

transition to an environmental ethos” (323). Over the past six years as I have required college composition students to initiate a local inquiry, two students have investigated the use of water at the local ethanol plant. Both students were concerned about water conservation. Both investigated sources that provided statistics about the use of water to produce ethanol, which averages about 4-5 gallons of water per gallon of ethanol. However, when students contacted the manager of the ethanol plant, he explained that ethanol producers have begun to re-use or recover the waste water from production, and that it is a growing trend in Midwestern states. The manager also offered a counter argument that other industries use more water than an ethanol plant and farmers themselves use more water to produce corn than an ethanol plant. And he would be right.

Emerson Nafziger, professor of crop production and extension agronomist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign says, ““A good, high-yielding corn crop will use 22 or 23 inches of water...Twenty-two inches of water is a lot. A 200-bushel corn crop uses about 600,000 gallons of water — nearly 3,000 gallons per bushel”” (Bennett). Concerning irrigation, he notes, ““Think about a 160-acre cornfield irrigated with only 10 inches of water. That would take more than 250,000 gallons per acre, or some 40 million gallons for the field”” (Bennet). Luckily, in Illinois, where Nafziger resides, the average rainfall is 35 inches, and he notes, ““the sky is our best, most efficient irrigator”” (Bennet).

Since 1930, the average number of irrigation wells dug in Nebraska was 11,000 per decade and the 1970s showed the greatest increase in deep well irrigation with 30,000 wells. Most irrigation wells in Nebraska are found along the Platte River, in Merrick, Hall, and Buffalo counties where average rainfall is 24-26 inches of rain. Merrick and

Hall about Hamilton County. As of 2002, Nebraska followed only California in irrigated lands, with 7.5 million acres compared to 8.5 million. However, Nebraska far outdistanced California and all other states in sprinkler irrigated land, 5.6 million acres next to Texas' 3.5 million. Interestingly enough, when looking at a map of irrigated corn for grain, the counties that have over 50,000 acres of irrigated corn, indicated by a dark green color, follow the Ogallala Aquifer (Yoder).

In fact, there is a deep well irrigation historical marker erected by the state of Nebraska on August 17, 2005 in Streeter Park in Aurora. It states:

During the 1930's, Nebraska suffered one of the most serious droughts in its recorded history. In all parts of Nebraska rainfall was far below normal. In 1936, corn yielded only 1/10 as much per acre as it had during the years 1923-1932. The dry powdered soil began to blow, and as dust storms obscured the sun, parts of Nebraska and the Great Plains became 'the Dust Bowl.' Between 1930 and 1940, the state declined in population because of the unfavorable agricultural conditions.

This experience resulted in the increased use of deep-well irrigation. Nebraska is fortunate in having the largest supply of ground water in the central part of the United States. Hamilton County lies somewhat east of the center of the irrigation well area in Nebraska. A 225 foot deep well, sunk in the county by F.E. Edgerton in 1931, remains one of the deepest in the area. It is not uncommon for irrigated land to produce more than twice the crop raised on non-irrigated land. Irrigation is an important factor in the occupation of Nebraska by an agricultural population.

Clearly, water usage and deep well irrigation have been ecologically and historically important to my community and county and worthy of investigation, especially as we move into the future. Mary Louise Kelly of National Public Radio interviewed journalist Steve Solomon, author of *Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power and Civilization*, who argues that “water is surpassing oil as the world's scarcest critical resource...only 2.5 percent of the planet's water supply is fresh...much of which is locked away in glaciers. World water use in the past century grew twice as fast as world population.” Solomon states, ““We’ve now reached the limit where that trajectory can no longer continue...Suddenly we’re going to have to find a way to use the existing water resources in a far, far more productive manner than we ever did before, because there's simply not enough”” (Kelly). Solomon refers to fresh water usage by human beings. He doesn’t even refer to the rest of the inhabitants of the Earth. And we can learn from these other species. Stone cites Fritjof Capra who says we don’t have to build sustainable communities from scratch:

We can also model human societies after nature’s ecosystems, which are sustainable communities of plants, animals, and organisms. Since the outstanding characteristic of the biosphere is its inherent ability to sustain life, a sustainable community may be defined as one that is designed in such a way that its ways of life, businesses, economy, physical structures, and technologies respect, honor, and cooperate with nature’s inherent ability to sustain life. (35)

Sustainability concerns all living things because we are all interconnected.

“Nature sustains life by creating and nurturing communities. No individual organism can

exist for long in isolation” (Stone 37). If our watersheds don’t survive, we will all perish.

In *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, Wendell Berry describes this as a co-constitutive relationship:

We and our country create one another, depend on one another, are literally part of one another; ...our land passes in and out of our bodies just as our bodies pass in and out of our land; that as we and our land are part of one another, so all who are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another and so cannot possibly flourish alone. (22)

Defining Environmental Education

Because we live interdependently with all things, it is vital we teach students about all of our neighbors in our local watershed. Besides the two students who chose water conservation as a local topic of inquiry there have been very few times I have engaged students in environmental learning. In April 2002, fellow colleague and American history teacher, Brenda Klawonn constructed a place conscious curriculum unit on homesteading. The unit was interdisciplinary including language arts, history, biology and art. Students read excerpts of a novel on homesteading, *This Free Land* by Carri J. Mattan, a local author, in English classes and studied the Homestead Act in history classes. Klawonn arranged a day field trip to Beatrice, Nebraska to visit Homestead National Monument. While there, students rotated at sessions that included free writing at Daniel Freeman’s grave and listening to a speaker talk about gravestones. The only environmental learning we did was with the assistance of biology teacher, Dan Bergman,

measuring the water quality of Cub Creek including the temperature, pH, dissolved oxygen, nitrates and stream flow. The day ended with a tour of the national monument visitor center. Later, back in our classes, a local quilter, Angela McClean demonstrated the art of quilting. Students cut quilt pieces and each hand sewed a rail fence pattern block for a quilt.

This kind of interdisciplinary project is considered best practice in place conscious and environment-based education, but it is not a completely new concept in education. Woodhouse and Knapp argue that “progressive educators have promoted the concept for more than 100 years” (1). They contend that John Dewey advocated for a form of it in 1915. Dewey writes, “Experience [outside the school] has its geographical aspect, its artistic and its literary, its scientific and its historical side. All studies arise from aspects of the one earth and the one life lived upon it” (1).

Environment-based education (EBE) is a “form of school-based environmental education in which an instructor uses the local environment as a context for integrating subjects and a source of real world learning experiments” (Ernst 15). Environment-based education differs from environment education (EE) because unlike EE that may be isolated topics in a classroom, EBE’s emphasis is interdisciplinary, student-directed learning. It focuses on issue and action skill development, systemic use of interdisciplinary, project-or issue-based pedagogy, and its duration can be semester or yearlong (Ernst 16). Ernst cites twelve reports including the Harvard Graduate School of Education for the Rural Trust regarding a “growing body of evidence [that] supports the relevance of environmental education (EE) to formal education, with positive student outcomes in the areas of reading, math, and science achievement; critical thinking;

motivation and engagement; and leadership and character skills” (15). Stone cites similar affirmation of sustainability education, “higher scores on standardized measures of academic achievement (reading, writing, math, science, social studies, GPA); improved behavior in class, greater pride and ownership in their accomplishments, increases in self-esteem, conflict resolution, problem-solving; and higher-level thinking skills”(39).

Place conscious pedagogy grew out of the environmental education movement which recognizes that the best forms of teaching include, “inquiry-based projects; real-life projects and service-learning, tying academic concepts to real-world; student-led projects and activities, including leadership, cooperative learning, and group work; and hands-on learning, or learning by ‘doing’” (Wheeler, et al 36-37). The best programs adopt an integrated approach (integrating several disciplines); utilize effective communication and documentation between team members, teachers, schools, and the community; involve community partners; provide professional development of environmental education teachers; provide authentic assessment; and are long-term rather than short-term programs (37-38).

Our place conscious unit on homesteading met several environment-based education criteria but also lacked some of the criteria for best practice—we could have integrated more environmental learning, utilized more professional development of teachers, focused a bit more on service-learning, and it was short term, lasting only two weeks. It was also a program that our principal asked, “Are you going to do this for just one year?” He was concerned about the field trip’s effect on other teachers’ classrooms (students out of class for a day) and the transportation cost of a 200 mile round trip to the Homestead National Monument. Unfortunately, we were only allowed one year of this

place conscious unit. Ernst cites several reasons why environment-based education (and place conscious education) is not taught, including “lack of planning time, administrative support, transportation and funding” (17). Overall, however, the greatest obstacle for implementing environment-based education was lack of teaching preparation in preservice or inservice programs, especially in interdisciplinary methods. Ernst writes there is also a misconception that all environment education must take place in the science curriculum, and in her investigation of service-learning literature, Ernst also found “a lack of interdisciplinary textbooks that incorporate service learning, teachers often invest much personal time and effort in conducting research, gathering materials, and planning lessons...[and that] negative reactions of colleagues and parents, and initial uncertainty accompanying a new service project [were] barriers” (17).

Defining Best Practices

Since 2002, I have not taught another interdisciplinary unit with other instructors. Part of the reason for this is I no longer teach eleventh grade, and since Klawonn was the American history teacher at that level, we haven’t had an opportunity to collaborate again. The No Child Left Behind mandate also affected any interdisciplinary curriculum at the eleventh grade level as this is the grade level where many assessments occur. The farmer digital story project, however, was first conceived as an environment-based project. Bill and Jan Whitney, directors of the Prairie Plains Resource Institute in Aurora, first approached me in 2000, asking me if I could create a unit where students could interview local farmers who lived and farmed along the Platte River in Hamilton County. They both wanted to preserve some of the knowledge and information of those who farmed along the Platte, hoping to retain some of the history of how the river had

changed throughout the years. The Whitneys began a summer day camp, Summer Orientation About Rivers (SOAR) in 1992 which is an interdisciplinary experience for elementary students, teaching them about the Platte River and surrounding area. It is a program deeply enmeshed in place and one I have admired as an educator my entire career in Aurora. In October 2009, the Whitney's attended the National Land and Conservation Conference in Portland, Oregon and presented a session titled "Connecting People to Land through Educational Programming" and in their program they summarized the SOAR program:

Mornings are spent in the field exploring natural and/or historic sites. These have included four Prairie Plains land preserves, a county park, some private lands, agricultural businesses and some local historic sites and cemeteries. Usually three or four rotating sessions are held each morning; several of these during the week include guest presenters who are specialists in various disciplines, e.g. ornithology, ichthyology, herpetology, mammalogy, entomology, botany, soils, hydrology, art, local history, writing or storytelling to name just a few. These presenters may come from the community, or may be teachers, professors, artists, conservation professionals, historians, etc. from various other locations. SOAR returns to the school in the early afternoon for lab and classroom activities. Thursday evening campers return with their families for a program showing, through music, art exhibits and the 'Microbe Show' lab, what has been accomplished during the week.

SOAR 2011 included reading and writing poetry, planting flowers on the prairie, a study of spiders, with a web weaving activity where students created a web with a hula hoop and yarn and “flies” out of ping pong balls and Velcro. Students went to Farmer’s Valley Cemetery, the same cemetery I visited in 1997. They learned about the symbolism on the gravestones and applied shaving cream to read the words on the stones. They also learned dowsing, or a type of divination employed in attempts to locate ground water, buried metals or ores. At the cemetery students also performed a melodrama and competed in cart races to learn about the Oregon Trail. They went to a local slough to look for water spiders, catfish, and any other species living there and everything they caught was studied under a microscope. They had a guest herpetologist speak to them about salamanders, frogs, snakes, and toads and an ornithologist spoke about raptor recovery. Bill Whitney, the director, took them on a river walk and explained everything around them but focused on the pace of the river at certain junctions. The students also created masks in the forms of animals from papier-mâché.

As I write this chapter, our daughter, Anna, has just completed her tenth year in the SOAR program. First she was a camper through second to sixth grades, and couldn’t wait to become a peer leader in the seventh grade. This year was a “Night” year for SOAR which meant the students experienced a study of constellations and bats. Campers learned about bats but also hunted them, but none were found. The Night camp also included landscape watercolor painting at twilight. Anna said the best thing about SOAR is the final day where they return to the Platte River for River Day which means games and relays like the Fish Find, obstacle course, tube races, the Rain Drop Relay that

teaches about the rain cycle, and her all-time favorite: Raccoons R Us, learning about the behaviors of raccoons.

The success of the SOAR camp has been phenomenal but not surprising. Since its inception in 1992, another camp emerged in 1996 at another site located in the Kearney area and is cosponsored by Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary. Each year there is a waiting list to get into the camp, and if parents aren't diligent about signing up, their child may miss the opportunity. The camp allows students to do for one week what they should be doing every day in our schools: learning about the world that surrounds them. The mission statement for SOAR states,

SOAR's mission is to get local children out on the land—and in the water—to discover the great diversity of life that exists just beyond their own back yards. By using local field sites and an interdisciplinary curriculum including natural and physical science, history, art, agriculture, language arts and music, SOAR aims to create a deeper appreciation for where we live in the minds of our children. (Whitney and Whitney)

All of the program's activities are based on this mission. The Whitneys also acknowledge several other reasons why the program works so well including a fully engaged core staff that enjoys outdoor education, works well together and is willing to commit the necessary time and effort; diverse and outstanding local field sites with easy access; a highly structured format that still allows for flexibility and spontaneous moments of discovery; the peer leaders, the youth who are the backbone of the structure of the program; careful financial management; and regular evaluation and modification. Bill and Jan Whitney understand what Michael Stone understands about sustainability,

The profound lesson to be learned from nature is that sustainability is not an individual property, but a property of an entire web of relationships. It always involves a whole community. These lessons can be extrapolated to the world of social relations. Qualities that characterize healthy natural ecosystems, such as diversity and interdependence, support healthy human communities as well. (37)

We are surrounded by water in Hamilton County Nebraska. The south channel of the Platte River is the northern boundary of the county, Lincoln Creek runs through the city of Aurora, and a branch of the Big Blue River runs through the southern part of the county. Of course, under our feet is the immense underground sea, the Ogallala Aquifer. As noted previously, farming is the backbone of our community, but how does one teacher approach the subject of water conservation when we are surrounded by so much of it? Many farmers believe the aquifer will last forever and replenish itself. But will it? Will the constant irrigation eventually deplete it? What happens when the entire world is in a dire water shortage? How much would someone pay for water? Will farmers sell their land so others can have the water for other purposes beyond farming? Right now, Nebraskans are in a political battle over allowing the new Keystone oil pipeline from the TransCanada Corporation to be built underground. Will it endanger the aquifer? TransCanada tells us no, but the recent leak of ExxonMobile's pipeline under the Yellowstone River in Montana gives us pause. Also, with the economy in its present state, people need jobs, so the pipeline seems like great economic development.

In a perfect place-conscious classroom students could do research on all of these issues. They could study the effect of irrigation practices (and the amount of energy it

takes to run irrigation pumps), changes in the flow of rivers, water levels of the aquifer and the dangers an oil leak would pose. They could also study crop production, determining which crops use less water or devise a plan to decrease water consumption even in dry weather. I envision students in English classes writing letters to their congressman and senators concerning political issues surrounding water conservation and oil transport. English classes would also be an appropriate place to discuss the spiritual aspect of land and water stewardship. Students could devise a public forum on water usage involving members of the community, but especially farmers. It would be a hands-on, interactive learning experience for all. I envision an interdisciplinary study with the history teacher exploring the history of deep well irrigation and its impact on farming, the biology teacher studying the changes in the river and the impact upon wildlife species, the agriculture teacher looking at corn and soybean production, livestock needs, and diversified farming practice, and the business teacher investigating the cost of irrigation practices and crop yields.

Jeff Lacey, Nebraska poet and Ralston High School English teacher, has successfully integrated sustainable ecology into his sophomore English class for the past six years. Lacey, working with his district's curriculum director, lobbied to make a required unit on nonfiction writing include environmental responsibility and awareness. He writes:

The unit involves several kinds of readings, but the emphasis is on the work of three writers: Nebraskan naturalist and writer Loren Eiseley; Aldo Leopold, whose work *Sand County Almanac* is considered a major work

of environmentalist literature; and the poet Mary Oliver, whose poems often focus on her relationship to the natural world.

The unit is also unusual in that I ask students to research their local watershed and reflect on their role in it, what they know about it, etc. We travel to a local park/stream that is a ten-minute walk to school and ask them to do all kinds of observation and writing.

The students create Ralston Almanacs that include field journals that record data on two sites: a shared site for the entire class and a “home range” site where students are to visit at least three times. Students are instructed to select a home range site of their own choice where they feel comfortable and that is full of sensory variety—plants, animals and natural features, including several habitats—trees, fields, lakes, ponds, streams or marsh. Their final portfolios include their field journals; a letter to the reader; a site analysis essay based upon their shared and home site’s qualitative and quantitative data; a literary analysis or quote response essay; and a poem or lyrical essay capturing a rich description of a chosen subject and the observer’s emotional connection to the subject.

Lacey’s unit on environmental responsibility encourages stewardship of the land and water. This is the kind of care and concern I have witnessed in some of our area farmers. Over the three years my students interviewed local farmers, I got to know a few of them. There are several organic farmers in Hamilton County, including Paul Huenefeld. Paul was interviewed by English 12 students more than once. Recently, his brother Dan has begun conversion to organic. I know this about Dan because in a small town like Aurora, you run into people. I ran into Dan at the local pharmacy and asked how he was doing, and he told me he was doing well and making the change in farming

practices. I was pleased. I taught all but one of Dan and Linda Huenefeld's children and they are parents who take a great interest in their children's education.

One farmer I have not interviewed is Don Vetter. His name was one of the first names Bill and Jan Whitney suggested for the farmer digital story project. The Whitney's knew Don's story was worthy of preserving. I did ask students to interview Don, but the students and he couldn't find a time convenient for both. Don's story is an amazing journey. His son Dave's story is just as phenomenal. Don, with his son Dave, worked to become a certified organic farm in 1978 and became Grain Place Foods in 1979. Don began organic farming in 1953. Vicki Uhland writes, "Vetter stopped using farming chemicals in 1953. 'I was kind of an oddball...Probably one of the toughest things was peer pressure. So many people thought I was a moron'...[Dave] and his father built Grain Place Foods, one of the first organic processing plants in the Midwest, to serve the small-scale organic farmers ignored by the big processors." Dave earned his bachelor's degree in agronomy soil science at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and also his master of divinity from the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. Dave Vetter has combined his two passions into his calling: "There's a big expression of faith in engaging in agriculture, even if you're willing to admit it or not...We joke that every farmer who puts seed in the soil relies on faith it will grow. [I want] to do a 'ministry to the soil.' A lot of divinity has to do with stewardship issues" (Uhland).

As a teacher, connecting with surrounding farmers has been a highlight of my career. My students and I have learned about their dedication and commitment to the land and our community. One of the unexpected outcomes of conducting interviews with farmers over a three year period was an ongoing dialogue with one of the farmers, an 86-

year-old retiree. Ardean Andersen lived and farmed near Marquette, ten miles north of Aurora. He is the local historian for the Kronborg church community. In the summer of 2009, he talked to SOAR summer campers about the history of that Danish community. I was a visitor that day who was invited to participate in a traditional Danish dance, but I also wanted to try out æbleskivers, a pastry I had heard about from my students but never tasted. When it was time to tour the church, cemetery and grounds, I was deeply impressed at Ardean's vast knowledge of the place and his fluency in Danish. Ardean was interviewed in the first year of the project, and after I wrote to him asking permission to publish his story online, he wrote me a lovely thank you note and noted how challenging it must have been for my students to come to their farm and interview total strangers. He wrote about the final version of the story the two students created and how one sentence gave him and his wife quite a “chuckle”—the one that says, ‘He still loves his wife after fifty-eight *long* years!’ Mercy, that must be an eternity to them!” The following year, I again wrote to Ardean asking for permission to print his words about his experience, and he wrote yet another letter, commending the work we were doing so students could grasp the importance of teaching about the environment through the study of farming.

I do agree that you as Educators/Teachers have a great responsibility in presenting farmers' philosophy...but as time goes on, this unique position is being diminished as the rural population is shrinking and as large corporate entities begin to dilute the best interest of land usage for shareholder and personal profits, the whole picture becomes counter-productive for the benefit of society in general...While there is a wealth of

information easily available, it takes a ‘hands-on; approach such as your projects to give the younger generation a personal knowledge of our environment...it becomes increasingly imperative to stay current on our environment and especially about water conservation as time goes by—and good water will become more crucial than oil in years to come.

Ardean’s words impressed upon me his recognition of the worthiness of place conscious pedagogy and why it was important to instill this sense of living well ecologically. I imagine Ardean remembers a time when farms were smaller and the school year was shorter and children helped out on these farms, where manual labor was predominant. Yes, farming still requires a lot of work, but it is because of the large size of the operation, not so much labor intensive, unless it’s an organic farm. Ardean’s words also remind me that I need the kind of long term place conscious or environment-based curriculum so that my students can study issues more in depth. He has a wealth of knowledge my students never had a chance to tap because of the unit’s brevity.

Ardean is a soft-spoken man whose wisdom will remain with me well into the future. He closed his last letter with a quote from Alfred Norris, words that conveyed he understood very well the concept of sustainability.

Perhaps these words penned by the late Alfred Norris says it all:

We are not born to subdue, but to co-exist with our world. We were not born to change the natural world, but to accept it as a temporary heritage. We need to take large doses of humility to inspire gratitude for the opportunity that our birth gave us. We

must learn to appreciate the wonders that surround us; the
mysteries that inspire us, and the love of life that sustains us.

Conclusion

Living Well: Sustaining Our Future

Most educators for sustainability agree that ecological literacy is at the heart of education for sustainability and that the social and economic dimensions of our impact on the planet need extensive exploration by our students. –Keith A. Wheeler and John M. Byrne, *Planning for Higher Education*.

My investigation of place conscious pedagogy culminated in a deeper desire to convey more fully to my present and future students how to live sustainable lives. As I have written and recalled my attempts at grounding my classroom curriculum in a place conscious model, I have continually come back to the roots of place conscious theory: the ecological movement. As a place conscious educator, I must truly try harder to create a more inquiry-based classroom involving other teachers in various disciplines. I must advocate in our school district for the necessity of getting our students out into the community to grasp something about our natural world. Stone writes,

The capacity to create sustainable societies...depends on ecological literacy—the ability to understand the basics principles of ecology, coupled with the values, skills, and conviction to act on that understanding...[There are] four guiding principles: Nature is our teacher, sustainability is a community practice, the real world is the optimal learning environment, and sustainable living is rooted in a deep knowledge of place. (35, 36)

Derek Owens writes that it isn't just about ecology but our total environment. He believes composition studies should be conceived as environmental studies or "the study of one's own immediate and future environs ...so that students might explore how their identities have been composed by such places and vice versa" (6). What Owens asks us to do is look around. Watch. Observe. Write. Whether it is our secondary classroom, our home or school office, dorm room, our kitchen, or our own backyard, we need to write in order to understand how our environment shapes us. And if Nature is our teacher, we need to move beyond our backyards to understand more about the land, the water, and other species beyond *homo sapiens*.

But it's not so easy. Writing these chapters has reminded me that instilling Haas and Nachtigal's five senses is challenging. At best, I instilled four of them somewhat well through my isolated classroom projects. I do believe my students have a sense of belonging in a community and a sense of connectivity, but they are just beginning to grasp something about making a living and the basic tenets of civic action. I remain flummoxed by how to instill in my students an ecological well being. Part of the reason I wasn't able to instill the five senses as deeply as I had hoped may have been a lack of connectivity to other areas of the curriculum. If students had had a chance to conceptualize place consciousness through an interdisciplinary experience then the impact would have been profound and long lasting. That is why the Whitney's SOAR summer camp is so successful—its integration of multiple disciplines allows students to make the connections and understand the relationships among the fields of study, that is, science, history, language, art and music.

I believe the English classroom is one of the best places to practice place conscious education but it is not the only one. The language arts classroom gives voice to a student's learning but the acquisition of knowledge and the comprehension of experience should occur in multiple disciplines for the most powerful and empowering learning. In Aurora, this interdisciplinary learning is the rule rather than the exception at the middle school. This middle school philosophy is enacted across the country where teachers in each subject area meet daily to plan around a particular theme or concept and develop curriculum in each discipline in order to teach a whole curriculum to a whole student.

A shift to an interdisciplinary model at the secondary level would best accommodate a place conscious curriculum. Beginning in their freshman year, teachers would meet to study a local issue or problem that students could investigate and develop an integrated curriculum. In subsequent years students could continue to pursue their original inquiry, developing a more complex set of questions and more public advocacy. As seniors, students would have compiled a portfolio of their four years of work and conducted a public forum culminating in a specific form of social action.

An accommodating instructional model is necessary for successfully implementing place-based or environment-based learning. Ernst acknowledges there are several barriers to environment-based education practice. Sometimes, our institutional structure is the proverbial brick wall, and place conscious educators keep banging their heads against it. Wheeler and Byrne concur:

As of 2002, the United States had not adopted sustainability education as a national goal. Relatively few K-12 educators in the United States are

familiar with sustainability education policy efforts. Few have worked to implement education for sustainability in their classrooms. Institutional support is poor. (Wheeler and Byrne 27)

But why must it be this way? Why do our school systems continue to advocate for preparing our students to become consumers? As wheels in the cog of the corporate world not unlike the industrial world of the past? Clearly higher education must play a vital role in the paradigm shift needed to initiate sustainable education practices. If we do not sustain our natural world, then our consumer-based society is a moot point. There will be nothing to consume.

Ernst notes that teacher preparation must play an integral part in developing place conscious, environment-based, or sustainability education. Without inservice or preservice training in these interrelated pedagogical theories, teachers like me will continue to struggle to implement these practices within her classroom or within her school district.

Effective teacher education is vital in producing an environmentally literate population that can advance the transition to sustainability. A commitment from teacher education institutions is necessary to orient teacher education toward sustainability. This is because education for sustainability requires a new outlook that prospective teachers—and teacher educators—might not have experienced in their education.

(Wheeler and Byrne 27)

Goggin and Waggoner also note that it is educators and those of us who research education who are responsible for bringing sustainability education to the attention of a

national audience. Goggin writes, “Literacies of sustainability—the acquisition of textual knowledges on sustainability—and narratives of sustainability further expand the possibilities for humanistic inquiry, particularly for such fields as literature, writing studies, English education, community literacy, and linguistics” (*Rhetorics*, 4). We are the ones who will have an impact upon our “young people who will make up future citizenry and assume both our legacies and their own responsibilities for a sustainable society” (49). We are the ones who must “make spheres of environmental literacy and sustainability visible and relevant enough so that students can conceive of themselves as participants, consumers, corporate leaders, politicians, parents, and, yes, even activists” (49). We are the ones who must act upon the five senses in a successful place conscious pedagogy.

I am hopeful that our institutions of higher learning are meeting the needs of sustainability education. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln has an environmental studies program that has produced undergraduate students who are mindful of a sustainable future. One student, Trevis Carmichael, imagines a 21st Century educational farmstead that would function much like UN-L’s well known Cedar Point Biological Station used by many undergraduate students in biology. Cedar Point, near Ogallala, has been a hands-on learning environment alluded to often by John Janovy, UN-L professor of biology who has been the station’s director twice since 1979. Carmichael conceptualizes the farmstead as

an integrated farm/school/bicycle shop located near Lincoln, Nebraska.

This ‘21st Century Educational Farmstead’ will incorporate the mainstream educational goals (mathematics, English, science etc. all

aimed toward academic preparation) with exposure to the natural environment. The foundation for teaching will be framed within bicycle shop-and farm-based activities. This framework will provide an education grounded in real-life activities that are relevant to the student. It's the difference between an elaborate math word problem involving two trains traveling through a tunnel, and determining the ideal irrigation rate for the vegetable garden in July—one has no real repercussions outside the classroom, while the other determines the success or failure of the students' hard work. (4)

Carmichael's farmstead would be built around a small-scale organic farm where students could learn about the processes of farming through integrated learning. The bicycle shop would especially teach physics but also mechanical skills training. He envisions both the farm and bicycle shops as businesses where food could be grown and sold at a farmer's market and bicycle repair could be offered at discount prices much like a college of hair design offers discounted haircuts (4). Besides the Cedar Point model, Carmichael's farmstead also drew inspiration from several local sources in the Lincoln, Nebraska area, namely Shadow Brook Farm, Robinette Farm, Re-Cycled Bicycle shop, the defunct Walton Trail Company, The ZNETH house in Omaha which is an example of how engineering and architecture students could contribute to the design of sustainable buildings, and Prairie Hill Learning Center, a center for Montessori education using a farm environment and mixed-age learning projects, and with an environmentally conscious focus (5).

Ultimately, the farm/school/ bicycle shop could be used by several university departments as a demonstration school. Carmichael's vision is for the school to become a K-12 facility that could be utilized by many:

The farm school would be in operation during the school year for use by the various departments. The close proximity to Lincoln would make it possible to visit during a normal semester schedule...simply providing a more rural setting for classes could inspire creative teaching strategies. I imagine [it] as a demonstration facility—making the hard work and research being done across the University more visible and integrated. The public would have access to [it] and having multiple viewpoints represented in the facilities would attract a wide audience and promote a sense of community that seems to be lacking somewhat between the University and the general public. (26)

Students like Trevis Carmichael give me hope that our future generation will actively promote sustainable living in their local communities, because a group of university professors understood what it means to teach the “whole student.” Stone writes, “Preparing young people for sustainable living requires educators who can touch and influence the whole student, including his or her values, abilities, and relationship to the natural world [through] a core set of competencies—of head, heart, hands, and spirit” (44). He represents the head as cognitive, the heart as emotional, the hands as active, and the spirit as connectional. He also cites writer/educator Pamela Michael who writes that when we invite students to imagine real places, they will find their place in the natural world and “can name the plants and animals around them, understand the challenges of

living sustainably...and gain the tools and imagination to address those challenges. You get children who know their 'ecological addresses'...You get hope" (43).

Haas and Nachtigal write that living well spiritually means "discerning connections to one's place on earth, that is, understanding and articulating the meaning of living one's life in a given place," and in that regard, this dissertation is my articulation of that understanding. I live in two places, a geographical center, in a real, live community, Aurora, Nebraska, not far from the Platte River and surrounded by acres and acres of corn and soybeans, but also my pedagogical or spiritual center, immersed in advocating place consciousness in my classroom through diverse means. I am someone who cares deeply about this place I call home and my life work educating young people.

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